We live in a time of deep distrust—of each other, the media, and institutions of all kinds. In this volume of essays, innovative journalists from newspapers, public radio, civic media groups, and new media collectives examine how we’ve reached this point. The loss of newspapers and fracturing of the information ecosystem have weakened our sense of a shared identity, but many people have long felt excluded, misrepresented, and unable to see themselves and their experiences reflected in news reporting. These essays highlight opportunities that are emerging as old practices give way to the new demands of an engaged, diverse, and restive public. They call on us to create a more inclusive democratic narrative that better captures the rich diversity of our nation and its complicated history.

Contributors:
Jennifer Brandel  Eve Pearlman
Darryl Holliday  David Plazas
Michelle Holmes  Martin G. Reynolds
Linda Miller  Ben Trefny
Doug Oplinger  Subramaniam Vincent

Reinventing Journalism to Strengthen Democracy
Insights from Innovators

Edited by Paloma Dallas and Paula Ellis
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The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, headquartered in Dayton, Ohio, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Founded in 1927 “to sponsor and carry out scientific research for the benefit of humanity,” the foundation is inspired by the innovativeness and ingenuity of its founder, the American inventor Charles F. Kettering. For the past four decades, the foundation’s research and programs have focused on the needs of democracy worldwide.

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Reinventing Journalism to Strengthen Democracy
he state of democracy today is of urgent concern to the Kettering Foundation and our allies and partners. Almost nightly, we hear distressing reports of social divisiveness, which undermines democracy, and we see signs that some people prefer to foment division and instill fear of others instead of encouraging the cross-cultural understanding and consensus-building essential to a democracy. We see an erosion in the rule of law, waning public confidence in democratic institutions, and the loss of democratic norms—the “soft guardrails of democracy.” And we have seen attacks on our free and independent press in its watchdog role. In response to these threats, we’ve seen institutions like the free press amplify efforts to evolve to meet this crisis.

In November 2022, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones launched the Center for Journalism & Democracy at Howard University with the critical mission of “strengthening historically-informed, pro-democracy journalism.” The center aims to reshape the field of investigative journalism by infusing it with a diversity of perspectives and lived experiences that have long been underrepresented in journalism and by departing from approaches that rely heavily on unrealistic notions of objectivity and neutrality. At the center’s inaugural Democracy Summit, Hannah-Jones gathered an audience of journalism students, mostly
Reinventing Journalism to Strengthen Democracy

from historically Black colleges and universities, journalists from an inclusive cross-section of media outlets and newsrooms, and panelists whom she described as representing “the diversity of America.” Framing the summit’s discussions, Hannah-Jones charged the audience: “The American people depend on us to be a watchdog over our democracy and to expose the continuing efforts to subvert it. And so the times demand that we liberate ourselves from the old conventions about journalism.”

The contributions that Paloma Dallas and Paula Ellis have assembled in this important collection are the products of the Kettering Foundation and our partners grappling with the old conventions of journalism and developing innovative interventions in service to strengthening our democracy. The contributors offer insights fundamental to the work of reinventing journalism. They ask questions about democratizing access to the tools of storytelling; they dissect the relationship between power, truth, and journalistic neutrality; and they explore journalism through the lens of connection and belonging.

At the Kettering Foundation, a pro-democracy, operating research foundation, we believe deeply in the potential of the free press to inform, empower, and unify by adding texture, shape, and clarity to the challenges facing democracy around the world. I’m deeply grateful to Paloma and Paula for their leadership on this collection of insights and to each of the contributors for their commitment to our democracy.

Sharon L. Davies
President and CEO
Kettering Foundation
We live in a time of deep distrust—of each other, the media, and institutions of all kinds. In this volume of essays, innovative journalists from newspapers, public radio, civic media groups, and new media collectives examine how we’ve reached this point. The loss of newspapers and fracturing of the information ecosystem have weakened our sense of a shared identity, but many people have long felt excluded, misrepresented, and unable to see themselves and their experiences reflected in news reporting. These essays highlight opportunities that are emerging as old practices give way to the new demands of an engaged, diverse, and restive public. They call on us to create a more inclusive democratic narrative that better captures the rich diversity of our nation and its complicated history.

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