

Case Study

The diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) series

How Injustice
Watch expanded
its commentary
to amplify Black
essential voices

Injustice Watch

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By [Ariam Alula](#)

Case study published by
Institute for Nonprofit News

Introduction

The national attention on racism this past year spurred changes within a nonprofit newsroom based in Chicago, [Injustice Watch](#), which works to expose how systemic failures prevent justice and equality.

The newsroom already was working to incorporate missing voices into its news coverage when the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in 2019 prompted a national dialogue about race. The leaders of Injustice Watch saw an urgent choice for them and our journalism industry to confront centuries-old practices harming marginalized communities, or repeat history.

Since then, Injustice Watch has rearranged its editorial priorities and focused on amplifying the voices of stakeholders often misrepresented in news coverage or left out entirely. The public interest newsroom has made structural changes, including a [commitment to serving audiences from an anti-racism lens](#), hiring a local group of consultants to facilitate DEI training, and prioritizing a new editorial series on the experiences of young Black activists in Chicago.

About Injustice Watch

Founded in 2015, Injustice Watch covers the criminal justice system, immigration, wrongful convictions, and judicial elections. Injustice Watch publishes in English and [Spanish](#) and includes commentary from its readers, including those who work in the legal profession. It has editorial partnerships with local and national media outlets including [Block Club Chicago](#), [South Side Weekly](#) and the Associated Press.

Injustice Watch is supported by a [core staff of nine](#) full time staff members, including Editor-in-Chief Adeshina Emmanuel and Executive Director Juliet Sorensen.

ABOUT INN

The Institute for Nonprofit News strengthens and supports more than 300 independent news organizations in a new kind of media network: nonprofit, nonpartisan and dedicated to public service. See: [inn.org](#).



USE THIS RESOURCE

Last year, INN published a report on diversity, equity and inclusion across the nonprofit news field. The report is based on survey data from 117 member publications about staff diversity in 2019. [Click here for the report.](#)

In the Online News Association's 2020 awards, Injustice Watch was a finalist for its work examining [discriminatory rhetoric from law enforcement officials on Facebook](#) and creating a [voting guide for Cook County's judicial elections](#). It was recognized in 2018 for its investigation of [the wrongful conviction of Lamonte McIntyre](#)—an innocent man who was imprisoned for 23 years. Injustice Watch's investigation led to his release in 2017.

A moment of introspection

For [Adeshina Emmanuel](#), the newsroom's editor-in-chief, being a Black man in a mostly white newsroom during the aftermath of George Floyd's death in May 2020 prompted a moment of introspection.

He knew that this was a moment for journalists to re-examine their roles. "This was a moment where we were going to have to step up and lead, and it was a time where there was a pulse beating, not just in the streets, but in people's hearts and their homes."

"I was like, well, what's journalism's role here? And what's my role?"

Like many Black journalists and those who come from communities that see themselves misrepresented or ignored by mainstream media, Emmanuel became increasingly critical of his newsroom's coverage of race and racial injustice. The publication does focus on topics of race and injustice, and will often tell the stories of people who are vulnerable to corrupt systems, however, these stories don't always speak to what's being done to fight the injustice and corrupt systems.

So just a year into his employment at Injustice Watch, Emmanuel began making changes. He started by asking himself a series of questions:

- **What** voices are we centering in our journalism?
- **Whose** voices are we, intentionally or unintentionally, leaving out?
- **How** can we give people from the community space to talk more about their lived experiences?

On the first day of June 2020, Emmanuel led a staff meeting on Zoom to talk about steps to meet the challenges of the moment.

First, the Injustice Watch team examined existing coverage from other news outlets. They found a few themes, similar to news coverage surrounding George Floyd's murder: [his legacy](#), [civic protests](#), and the [law enforcement officers who were implicated in the case](#).

The newsroom then looked internally at its own coverage. Until 2020, Executive Director [Juliet Sorensen](#) says that given the nature of their reporting and founding network, Injustice Watch's commentary mostly came from defense lawyers and journalists—who were also the earliest readers of the

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publication. Having that early readership was great, she said, “but, when I think of stakeholders, lawyers are not the individuals who are most impacted by the system.”

Back in April of that year, Emmanuel had discussed with editor Jonah Newman and audience engagement manager Charles Preston how to broaden Injustice Watch’s commentaries away from the mostly white, male civil rights attorneys and heads of advocacy organizations, and toward more diverse voices directly impacted by the inequalities the newsroom covers. The result of that conversation was a short memo that detailed the new outlet’s goals, target audiences, and what the team needed to do to get there.

One goal: Funding to pay for commentary. “If we want to make our commentary section more diverse, equitable and inclusive, we’ll need to compensate some of the people who write for us. If we only publish unpaid pieces, our commentary section will continue to be primarily white attorneys and advocates, and we want to make sure we’re not reinforcing power dynamics by taking labor from people for free,” explained the memo.

Essential Work launches

A few months later, Injustice Watch launched the [Essential Work series](#), a commentary series that uses first-person and multimedia storytelling to explore acts of resilience and resistance by young Black people in Chicago who are fighting racial injustice amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

The series’ authors write intimately about their relationship with essential work, both literally and figuratively. For example, in [‘To be a West Side organizer,’](#) 19-year-old writer Destiny Harris co-created a four-week training on how to implement the teachings of abolition work in a community setting. “Abolition is about burning down oppressive systems. But it is also about building strong relationships in our communities and knowing we have all we need to keep us safe.” Harris is the daughter of essential workers who work in disability caregiving and transit.


In this [essay](#), community organizer and photographer Kaleb Autman talks about their social justice-focused education and upbringing that inspired them to co-organize campaigns for the community.

Commentary

‘My ancestors were freedom fighters, and they’re teaching me how to fight’

By **Kaleb Autman** | September 22, 2020

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Kaleb Autman

Creating partnerships

[South Side Weekly](#) (SSW), a nonprofit newspaper dedicated to supporting cultural and civic engagement on the South Side, was a key early collaborator in the Essential Work series.

The partnership started when Emmanuel reached out to [Erisa Apantaku](#), the executive producer of [SSW Radio](#) (a hyperlocal podcast that accompanies South Side Weekly), with a request to help amplify Essential Work through audio-storytelling and photography. In addition to seeking a partner for help with storytelling and amplification, Emmanuel also reached out to SSW since the editor-in-chief, Jackie Serrato, is Latina. Emmanuel knew he wanted to build a partnership with an intersectional framework.

Emmanuel was familiar with South Side Weekly from writing for the news outlet earlier in his career. He remembered SSW Radio's 2018 project "[The Narratives of Robeson High School](#)," which interviewed community members about their memories and grief about the now closed Paul Robeson High School in the Englewood section of Chicago.

Since South Side Weekly is produced by a mostly volunteer staff, it was important that the Injustice Watch team compensated the contributors from the SSW network for their time and contributions. For example, Essential Work paid SSW's layout editor, [Davon Clark](#), to take some photos for the series, and Apantaku to produce audio.

It's important to note that Clark and Apantaku are both Black, and that the youth featured in the series who were all paid are Black. As Emmanuel explained: "It was important that I worked with Black people on the project. If I was going to pay people as contractors for photos and audio, then I would be paying it forward to other Black [journalists] and people."

Collaboration with SSW also offered a connection with new audiences, especially since the outlet specializes in telling stories of cultural and civic engagement on the South Side.

SOUTH SIDE WEEKLY

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About



The South Side Weekly is a nonprofit newspaper dedicated to supporting cultural and civic engagement on the South Side, and to developing emerging journalists, writers, and artists.

We publish in-depth coverage of politics, the arts, and issues of public interest alongside oral histories, poetry, fiction, interviews, and artwork from local photographers and illustrators.

The Weekly is produced by a mostly volunteer editorial staff and seeks contributions from across the city. We distribute the paper bi-weekly on Wednesdays. A full map of our distribution network is available [here](#).

If you have submissions, story ideas, comments, or questions, you can reach us by phone at (773) 234-5388, by email at editor@southsideweekly.com, or by mail at 6100 S Blackstone Ave. Chicago, IL 60637.

For information about [advertising](#), check out our [media kit](#) or call (773) 234-5388.

PAY YOUR PARTNERS AND COLLABORATORS.

TIP

In this [2019 blog post](#), media consultant and editor Angilee Shah writes that the power of news collaboration often lies within the newsroom's responsibility to pay for collaborations. "Pay people for their valuable and rare skills to report from within communities, from within their areas of expertise." Injustice Watch agrees. Every collaborator involved in the Essential Work series is paid, including commentators who received a few hundred dollars for their work. "South Side Weekly is also run by volunteers so I was also cognizant of the equity [component] and at that moment, I was certainly part of the reckoning." The team hopes to secure funding to increase compensation for future commentaries.



China Smith speaking at a protest in early June 2020. Photo is by Matt Gibson and featured in China and co-author Miracle Boyd's [Essential Work](#) piece.

The results

The Essential Work series made an impact on the news outlet's audiences, the project's contributors, and the wider community.

Overall, the Essential Work series enabled Injustice Watch to expand its coverage and audience focus toward the communities most impacted by its reporting — young Black people at the frontlines of their communities' response to the pandemic.

[China Smith](#), a youth organizer featured in the first Essential Work installment, described the experience of writing about their work as "therapeutic" because of the affirming public response. More importantly, through writing the piece and speaking for the audio piece they did, China mentioned that they were able to confront and unpack some of the challenges they face as a young Black person and activist.

The series also inspired two original poems in a separate series called [#SpreadTheWord](#) which are works created based on Injustice Watch reporting.

Injustice Watch doesn't intend to change its editorial focus anytime soon. "In general, the series has earned us a lot of trust and interest from a demographic we have previously struggled with.... I'm honored to have published these commentaries, and to have benefited from the perspectives of the commentators," Sorensen said.

The Injustice Watch team continues to publish more stories as a part of the Essential Work series, and plans to transition to more video content and illustrated storytelling in the coming months.

HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT PARTNER.

TIP

If you're hoping to partner to produce coverage but not sure where to start, think about the audiences who are most impacted by the systems you write about, and the organizations that serve those audiences. Start by reaching out to organizations you're familiar with. Then ask those organizations: Who else should I reach out to?



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JULIET SORENSEN,
INJUSTICE WATCH EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR