RACE AND RACISM:
Doing Good Better

As communicators, our power lies in storytelling. We choose the narratives, messengers, words, and images that persuade people to change their minds or take action.

With that power comes a responsibility to resist perpetuating racist systems and to do better. Or, as we say, do good.

To fulfill that responsibility, we must ask ourselves two fundamental questions: Is it possible to do social good communications work without talking about racism and racial equity? Can nonprofit and foundation communicators advance our missions without addressing race and racism?

We believe the answer is no.

Contents:

THE COMMUNICATIONS
NETWORK

Describing our work as "communications for good" is a directive to use communications to drive changes in attitudes, belief systems, norms, behaviors, and biases. To do this better, we need to talk, know, and act more intentionally regarding racial equity. Advancing racial equity in communications isn't just about changing what *we* say to *others*; it's also about changing the way we think.

When The Communications Network set out in 2019 to assess what expert practitioners and academics could tell us about applying equity-driven best practices to foundation and nonprofit communications, we did not find the perfect guide. What we did find were illuminating insights and helpful feedback from practitioners in the field that, together, offer us a sense of where we can begin to do better.

That's what this report is designed to provide: A starting point. We've focused on some essential conversations for communicators to have - with each other and within our organizations - so we can be honest about racism and bias and encourage different ways of thinking. It's important to recognize that this work is evolutionary, and fast-moving, and we will keep learning together.

It takes courage and vulnerability to talk about race and racism honestly. Let's keep pushing each other to do better in our work of doing good.

About the Project

The Communications Network began this project in 2018 to learn how to best promote and advance equity communications practices for leaders working in communications for good. Recognizing there are many facets of equity, we decided the exclusive focus of this project would be race. This decision reflects what we believed was the steepest climb for communicators in the social sector, and for the audiences we engage.

This project has resulted in a digital tool that offers actionable advice, *In Real Life* from communicators doing racial equity work in the field, and a host of resources to further learning. It is designed as a tool that will continue to evolve and inform our approach to racial equity as communicators.

Methodology

An initial research scan by **Gramercy Research Group** concluded that there is not enough recently published data on effective equity communications to develop credible literature review. Therefore, Gramercy shifted its approach to conducting an environmental scan (Appendix B). The environmental scan sought to answer two overarching questions:

> *(1) What does the current landscape of social sector communications practices look like as it pertains to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)?*
>
> *(2) What do communications that effectively promote DEI look like?*

In addition to Gramercy's environmental scan, consultants **M+R** and **We-Collab** engaged in a thorough research and analysis process in collaboration with The Communications Network DEI Work Group to understand the state of racial equity communications among foundations and nonprofits, including:

> *The environmental scan was conducted in 2019, prior to recent protests and national attention on racial justice. In response, many more organizations have specified their commitment to confronting race and racism.*

- *Interviews with The Communications Network DEI Work Group*
- *Online Survey of The Communications Network Members*
- *Key Informant Interviews of Communicators and Organizations in the Foundation and Nonprofit Sector*
- *Analysis and Development of Guidance*

This investigation led to several key findings and insights.

Key Findings from 2019 Research

Finding 1: An acknowledgement that the role of racism is mostly absent from available equity literature and resources for communicators.

Finding 2: Organizations have very different definitions of DEI – and communications practitioners may not have a good understanding of these concepts.

Please note that this research took place prior to the heightened national attention on racial justice, massive and prolonged protests. It is likely that organizations have specific practices for confronting race and racism in their communications.

Finding 3: Multicultural messaging promotes diversity; however, some people still do not see themselves reflected in the messaging.

Finding 4: The lack of data and metrics on effective racial equity communications is a serious information gap that needs to be addressed.

Race and Racism: Doing Good Better

Key Themes from Expert Practitioners

THEME A: Unlike other communications strategies that can be boiled down to user-friendly message wheels or guidelines, the work of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion is intensely personal.

THEME B: Racial equity work is relevant no matter what your **role is within an** organization or your organization's mission.

THEME C: There is often a disconnect between the way an organization communicates around racial equity and its own internal policies and practices.

Where are you?

You may be wondering where you and your organization stack up compared to others in the social sector communications space when it comes to understanding or prioritizing racial equity concepts, so let's take a quick look at the key findings from a 2019 online survey of The Communications Network members. It's important to note that this survey was conducted before the nationwide protests regarding racism and police violence in 2020.

More than half of survey respondents (57%) said their organization has clearly articulated DEI values or goals, yet...

42%
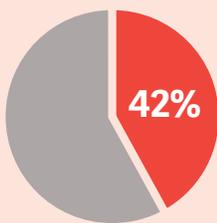
Fewer than half (42%) feel they have a strong understanding of DEI concepts.

About one in four (26%) do not feel supported and well prepared to incorporate their organization's DEI values into their communication work; **41%** felt ready just to an extent.

Only about one in 10 (13%) of those surveyed said their organization has a defined process for determining if, when, and how to speak out on current events pertaining to DEI issues.

More than half (56%) said DEI was not an explicit component of their organization's communication strategy.

When asked what were the most significant barriers or issues their organization faces as it relates to embracing DEI in communications (or observations of what social good communicators in the field face), respondents identified a number of roadblocks preventing them from advocating for racial equity:

57% Over half (57%) recognized implicit bias present in social good communications.

About one fifth (21%) said there was a lack of support for DEI initiatives within the organization.

- Nearly three out of five (59%) believe that social good communicators are unintentionally embracing dominant/subordinate communications frames.
- Almost half (46%) recognized unintentional reinforcement of stereotypes and an overall lack of understanding of what language should be used in racial equity messaging.

- About one fourth (23%) said social good communicators do not have the tools they need to target audiences or use appropriate images in messaging.
- Almost one-quarter (24%) replied "Other," and listed specific barriers such as staff reluctance to engage in uncomfortable conversations, or concern that funders or other audiences are not prepared to have conversations about DEI.

When asked what style of message development frameworks communicators use, here's how survey participants responded:

ASSET FRAMING

59% use Asset Framing
(The shift to narratives that define people by their aspirations and assets)

MULTI-CULTURAL FRAME

39% use a Multi-Cultural Frame
(Messaging that recognizes the differences in people and approaches these differences as an asset)

COLORBLIND FRAME

9% use the Colorblind Frame (Messaging that equalizes all people, emphasizes shared assets, and does not distinguish between groups of people)

RACIAL EQUITY FRAMEWORK

44% use the Racial Equity Framework
(Clearly articulates racial equity, bias, and institutional racism)
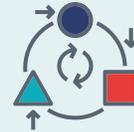
AFFIRM, COUNTER, TRANSFORM FRAMEWORK

10% use the Affirm, Counter, Transform Framework
(A tool to effectively talk about race and policy with diverse stakeholders)

FINDING 1:
THE ROLE OF RACISM

AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE ROLE OF RACISM IS MOSTLY ABSENT FROM AVAILABLE EQUITY LITERATURE AND RESOURCES FOR COMMUNICATORS.

Practically every resource for DEI communications that researchers turned to for this project did not mention or acknowledge racism. Consider these findings from 2019:

- *The terms "race" and "racism" rarely appear in organizational DEI definitions, even for organizations focused on justice and equity.*
- *While many foundations and nonprofits go to great lengths to describe their commitment to DEI, there is minimal language surrounding the impacts of race and racism.*

After finding that there was simply not enough recent published data on DEI communications upon which to base a credible literature review, we shifted to look at how DEI is defined by a variety of organizations and to assess readily available evidence of how DEI communications may be executed in those organizations.

While there appeared to be a fair amount of message tests conducted to determine whether certain equity-facing messages resonated with people, there is little data on how or if those messages accelerate or impede the advancement of racial equity. For example, some research shows that colorblind frames are not as effective as multicultural frames and may, in fact, be harmful; however, other research points to evidence that colorblind frames resonate more with white women than do multicultural frames because they do not see themselves in multicultural frames.

Timing is everything, of course, and we expect that by mid-2020, more than a year since our research was completed, race and racism were prominently featured in communications from nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. The upswell of conversation around anti-racism and white supremacist culture has, we hope, drawn a line in the sand for all of us that business as usual cannot continue without a reckoning with racism and how it presents in our work environments and is perpetuated by the decisions we make or fail to make at work.

This report aims to contribute to that discussion and that reckoning — but it is not fully able to explain why "race" and "racism" were largely missing from resources for our field of social good communicators.

Finally, even by 2019, the concepts of diversity, equity, and/or inclusion were growing rapidly, but with a mix of terminology and definitions, and were used most commonly to describe work pertaining to gender or sexual orientation - rarely race or ethnicity.

FINDING 2:

DEFINING DIVERSITY

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS OF DEI – AND PRACTITIONERS MAY NOT HAVE A GOOD UNDERSTANDING OF THESE CONCEPTS.

Our review showed that definitions of DEI varied between organizations. Some defined each word separately. Some included the term within their mission statements. Some provided examples. Others did not.

The D5 Coalition, referenced in several publications and websites about DEI.

Our communications practitioners' survey revealed there is very little shared understanding of what the key terms in this space – equity, diversity, and inclusion – actually mean. Fewer than half (42%) of survey respondents said they had a strong understanding of DEI concepts. The survey suggested that organizations can quickly lose sight of the individual components of these acronyms, whether they use the terms REDI, REI, EDI, DEI, or any other variation.

FINDING 3:
MESSAGING MATTERS

MULTICULTURAL MESSAGING PROMOTES DIVERSITY; HOWEVER, SOME PEOPLE STILL DO NOT SEE THEMSELVES REFLECTED IN THE MESSAGING.

While there is little data on effective racial equity communications, our researchers did find some published research on the impacts of "multicultural" versus "colorblind" frameworks.

Colorblind messaging implies that the best way to combat discrimination is to treat individuals as equals and negates race as a factor. For example, "We believe all employees, without regard to differences among them, are valuable to the success of our organization." This framework does not recognize the uniqueness of different races of people.

Multicultural messaging, on the other hand, recognizes the unique experiences and realities of different races and argues that differences should be accepted and celebrated. For example, "We seek to foster diversity across our organization and welcome the unique contributions our team members make based on their diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and lived experiences."

In one primary study by Gundemir and Galinsky (2018), a fictitious organization's use of a multicultural framework led both Whites and racial minorities to perceive higher levels of fairness toward minorities – even when additional information indicated racial discrimination in the organization. This false sense of fairness acted as camouflage, leading to lower perceived discrimination and higher mistrust of discrimination claims.

Prior research reviewed in the environmental scan highlighted that:

- Multicultural policies may desensitize racial minority employees to experiences of discrimination and reduce the likelihood of reporting discrimination. (Kaiser & Major, 2006)

- Multiculturalism can elicit a sense of exclusion in White people because they do not see themselves in multicultural messages, leading to dismissiveness of racial discrimination due to perceptions that minorities are unfairly advantaged. (Plaut et al., 2011)

- Colorblind messages paired with low racial diversity in a fictitious organization led African Americans to feel less trust and attribute more discrimination to the organization. (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008)

- A colorblind framework endorsed by White employees in a company with an underrepresentation of racial minorities led to increased perceived bias and lowered psychological engagement among racial minorities. (Plaut et al., 2009)

FINDING 4:
DATA ISN'T OPTIONAL

THE LACK OF DATA AND METRICS ON EFFECTIVE RACIAL EQUITY COMMUNICATIONS IS A SERIOUS INFORMATION GAP THAT NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED.

While our researchers found a few studies focused on messaging frameworks, there is limited data on how, or even if, those messages accelerate or impede the advancement of racial equity. This lack of standard metrics for assessing effectiveness hampers an organization's ability to embrace DEI values to their full extent.

For example, one resource identified "awards from special interest and advocacy" groups as a legitimate metric to assess the effectiveness of DEI communications. However, at least one study suggests that organizations that receive awards for DEI are often perceived to be inoculated against claims of racial bias, *even when legitimate claims of racial bias were presented.* (Gundemir and Galinsky, 2018)

One-quarter of surveyed communicators said they do not feel prepared to incorporate their organization's DEI values into their communication work; another 40% said they only felt ready to an extent.

The research gap regarding the efficacy of racial equity communications is significant. It is not clear how racial equity narratives or equity-focused communication shifts perspectives. The sector is in serious need of published research, metrics, and tested best practices.

This highlights an opportunity for us in the field of communications for social good: We should make it a priority to test and collect data on racial equity communications frameworks developed through shared knowledge and expertise.

IT'S PERSONAL

Unlike other communications strategies that can be boiled down to user-friendly message wheels or guidelines, the work of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion is intensely personal.

Confronting one's racism isn't easy, but it may be even harder for people who have committed their careers to doing good.

As one person said during an interview, "From my perspective, I don't see a world in which just handing someone some phrases or strategies is going to move the needle very much… I think it's really about the individual's understanding, skills, and practice around equity that leads to individuals and organizations communicating effectively around race, racial diversity, and inclusion."

Over and over, we heard practitioners whose organizations are eager to make racial equity more central to their work say, "You have to do the work." So, what is the work, exactly? Here's what was shared:

42%

Less than half of survey participants feel they have a strong understanding of DEI concepts.

ACKNOWLEDGING:

The work involves learning as much as possible about historical racial oppression and the countless ways it continues to manifest itself today. It includes acknowledging that even if you were not a direct perpetrator of oppression, you still may benefit from racially oppressive systems that provide advantages to White Americans, and opportunities not as easily accessible to African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native American, Alaskan Natives, and other people of color.

REFLECTING:

The work includes continuous self-reflection to see if you are perpetuating biases and stereotypes that serve the dominant power structure. This can be as simple as looking at the images you are using to describe your programs: Are White people almost always portrayed as benevolent staff and volunteers? Are people of color almost always portrayed as the recipients of your services or programs?

HIRING:

The work is hiring African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, and other people of color to your communications team in positions that allow them to influence strategy. This is critical; more than 70% of the communicators we surveyed identify as White.

LEARNING:

The work may include intentionally consuming books and podcasts, attending seminars, or getting individual or team coaching about systemic racism and/or implicit bias. If you read *In Real Life* in this report, you'll learn that one of our peers put herself on a communications "diet," removing herself from listservs and distribution lists of White-led organizations. She then signed up for newsletters produced by people of color and racial justice organizations. This free, simple strategy helped accelerate her understanding. Platforms like Medium make it easy for us to curate our own reading experiences, and Black Twitter is something that anyone can follow.

Immersing ourselves in different perspectives and hearing the voices of African American, Latino, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Alaskan Natives, and other people of color can expand our horizons and help with private introspection and examination.

> **" I don't see a world in which just handing someone some phrases or strategies is going to move the needle very much...**
>
> I think it's really about the individual's understanding, skills, and practice around equity that leads to individuals and organizations communicating effectively around race."
>
> **– Expert Practitioner**

IT'S ACCESSIBLE

Racial equity work is relevant no matter what your role is within an organization or your organization's mission.

1 in 10

Only one in 10 of those surveyed said their organization has a defined process for determining if, when, and how to speak out on current events pertaining to DEI issues.

It is not uncommon for people who hold the most public-facing jobs in an organization to be at the forefront of the racial equity evolution within foundations and nonprofits. But unless an organization invests in creating strong internal communications and culture-building across all levels of the staff, it may end up with a culture in which the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing – or why.

Often, staffers at the C-suite level, members of the communications team, and staff focused on advocacy represent an organization's DEI values externally and may be among the first to model racial equity practices on behalf of the organization. But don't assume that everyone else is on board and up to speed with this deep work. We must be attentive to ongoing development at all levels of our organizations. In addition, racial equity work is relevant regardless of organizational mission. It is critical for all organizations to move racial equity forward, because we all play a role, regardless of who we serve.

Comprehensive training, learning, and coaching should be made available to all, and building racial equity goals into staff performance objectives can help operationalize this work. But investing in the ongoing professional development of this caliber is another form of privilege, and foundations and nonprofits need to find and promote methods to advance this work in cost-efficient ways. Major foundations may be able to pay for training that many of their grantees could never afford so communicators need to aggressively bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots in the sector. Racial equity communication practices will not be effective if they are not accessible to all.

IT'S INTERNAL

There is often a disconnect between the way an organization communicates around racial equity and its internal policies and practices.

So, you've scrubbed your website and printed materials to make sure to include people of all skin tones. Your language is inclusive. Some of your materials are available in Spanish. So far so good, but when someone looks at your staff roster, the handful of staff of color tend to hold lower-level positions, and your board is still mostly (or completely) populated by White people.

This is not an uncommon scenario for the social good sector. Our survey respondents rated their organizations' staffs as more diverse than their boards, and their boards as more diverse than their senior leadership. When it comes to communications staff, we heard that "the hiring guidelines make for very disproportionately White staff at communications agencies and foundations, which limits diverse perspectives and life experiences." This can mean that while we might be striving to do better in our public-facing approach to racial equity, it may not translate to our internal practices.

1 in 5
respondents said there was a lack of support for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within the organization.

> " **Without more people of color in communications and philanthropy overall,**
>
> we won't know what we are missing."
>
> **– Expert Practitioner**

"Not having a community of people of color within organizations also heightens a need to assimilate and code-switch," said one person we interviewed. This prompted a few people of color to explain that they often have to explain the racial implications of communications decisions to colleagues who out-rank them. This points to a critical need to adopt more inclusive hiring practices for staff and board.

However, simply addressing representation within our organizations is not enough. Hiring practices need to be pursued alongside efforts to reform the policies and practices that reflect how we get our work done, and whose voices are heard day-to-day. As one person we interviewed noted, "I think that without more people of color in communications, and philanthropy overall, we won't know what we are missing."

Guiding Questions to Advance Racial Equity Communications

When it comes to racial equity, transforming communications for good requires transforming the knowledge of communicators themselves. Advancing racial equity communications is a process, rather than a set of guidelines. With that in mind we have constructed some questions, based on our research, to help prompt us all to evaluate and evolve our work.

A set of broad areas to evaluate are listed below, with the fuller set of guiding questions available on our website. We encourage you to work with your colleagues and partners on these questions – not just once, but multiple times, as you incorporate these practices into your communications and organizational work.

Areas to Evaluate:

1. Are we spending our communications budgets in ways that support racial equity values?

2. How extensive are our relationships with reporters, editors, and other news media staff who are, themselves, African American, Latino, Asian American, Native American Alaskan Native, or people of color?

3. Do we have an ongoing feedback loop to seek input from people who live in the communities we exist to serve?

4. Are we letting equity guide our choices about the physical locations we use to hold meetings, conduct job interviews, engage stakeholders, and house our offices?

5. Have we infused racial equity into our organization's role in conferences, special events, panel presentations, and other settings?

6. Does our organization have guidelines for responding to racist incidents in the news - even if what happened is not central to our stated mission?

7. Has our organization begun a process of racial healing to help uncover how we may have contributed to racism and perpetuated inequities in the past? Do we include all levels of staff in these racial healing opportunities?

8. Have we developed reports to share what we have learned with others in the foundation and nonprofit community so we can grow together?
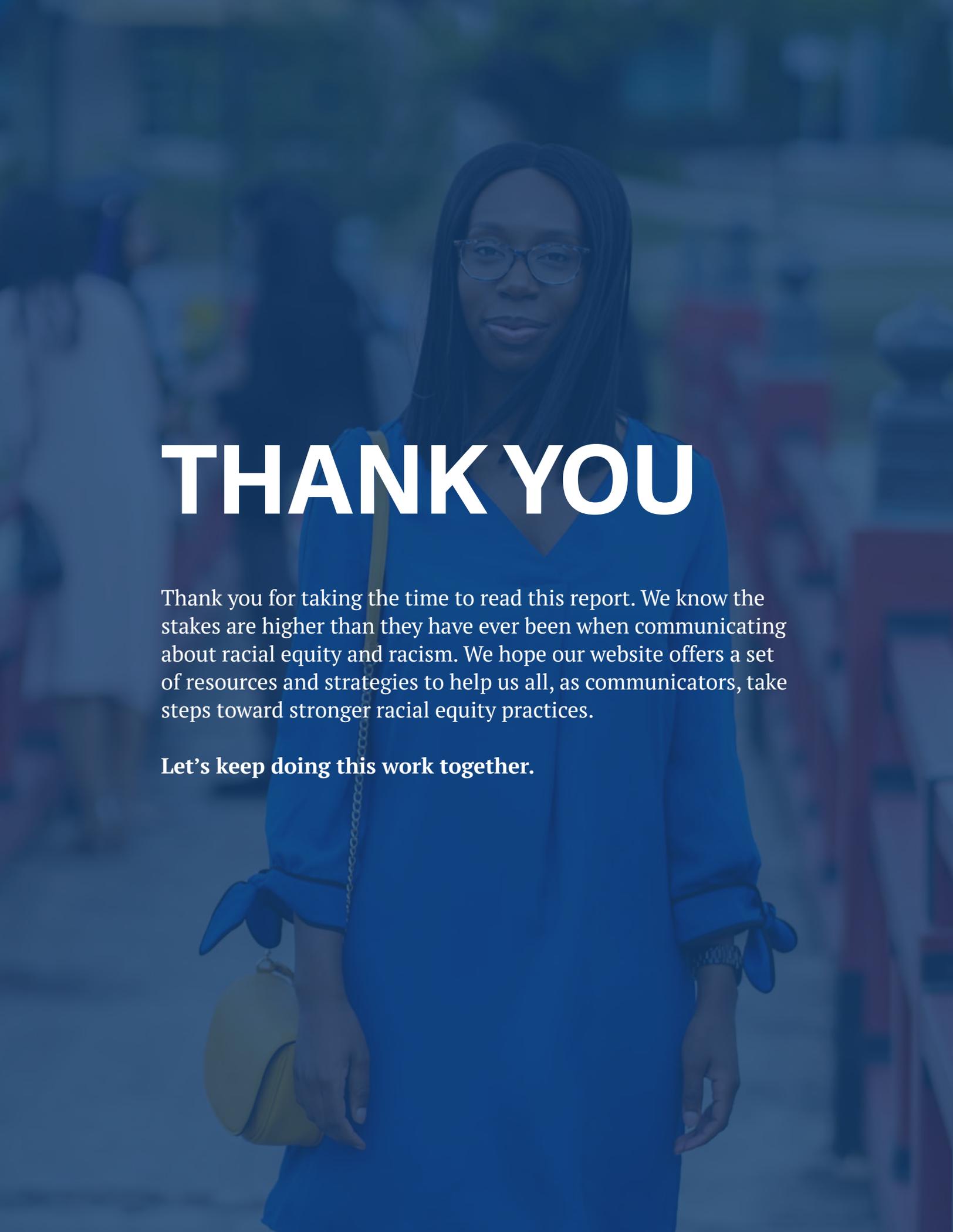
THANK YOU

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. We know the stakes are higher than they have ever been when communicating about racial equity and racism. We hope our website offers a set of resources and strategies to help us all, as communicators, take steps toward stronger racial equity practices.

Let's keep doing this work together.

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