Laura Washington: Thank you, Yvonne, and thank you and Alan and Senator Harris and all of the other members of the Foundation for making the effort and putting the energy into this very important conference.

For someone who has spent a lifetime, or at least a career covering race and poverty issues this discussion is long overdue, and unfortunately, we shouldn't even be having it.

One of my other roles in addition to teaching is a career in journalism, primarily in Chicago. I ran a publication called The Chicago Reporter which was founded in 1972 out of many of the same discussions that the Kerner Commission had in the late sixties. It was founded by a civil rights leader in Chicago who felt the need to make sure there was a watchdog on race and poverty, to make sure that some of the progress that we celebrated in the Civil Right Movement would be put into place. Well, the reason we're here today is obviously that we still have a ways to go. Almost 35 years later that publication is still around, still doing that kind of reporting.

I think that's important to know because earlier we talked about solutions. I think one of the solutions is to support more non-profit enterprises which are more invulnerable to the corporate pressures that we've heard about earlier. The kind of non-profits like the Reporter that can serve as monitors and watchdogs on these issues.

I want to tell you a story coming out of my experience with the Reporter which is similar to other stories you've heard earlier. But it's an extraordinary story and, I think, illustrative of a lot of the questions we're facing.

Some of you may have heard this story because it got national -- international -- attention at the time. It was the murder of a little girl named Ryan Harris. It happened on the South Side of Chicago in a neighborhood called Englewood, a poor African-American community. It happened in 1998. It was a heinous crime, I had to say that because, just to give you the flavor for the kind of story it was – Ryan was an eleven-year old girl, she was out one summer day riding her bike, and she disappeared. She was found the next day brutally beaten and sexually assaulted in an abandoned lot in Englewood. Massive news coverage followed, but only after the Chicago Police Department arrested the alleged perpetrators of the crime -- two little boys -- seven and eight year old boys.

When Ryan disappeared, there wasn't much paid attention to it because this is, as we know in the media, is one of those cheap stories -- at least that's the way media often views the disappearances of black children. But when the police department decided to charge seven and eight year old black boys with the crime, it became an international story. I remember the neighborhood and there were satellite trucks everywhere, helicopters flying overhead.

Obviously the story was attractive to the media because it was -- at least perceived to be -- very unusual. Young boys doing a crime like this was unheard of. Not only were these boys young, they were obviously younger than Ryan Harris, who was eleven -- they were seven and eight – and they were very small for their age. There was one story reported at the time that described the boys being arraigned at the Cook County courtroom, and the boys were so young and so small that their feet did not even touch the floor as they sat in their chairs.

Hard to believe, you would think, that they could do this crime. And in fact, I remember a day or two after the story broke, getting calls from people in the community who I had relationships with. They were asking me, “you know, how could the police do this? How could the media report this? This is just an impossible thing.” And I wondered myself.

Apparently, or unfortunately, too many other journalists did not wonder, and it was a reporter and some reporting by the Chicago Tribune. The reporter, Maurice Possley, finally started to get wise that this might not be a true story. Three weeks later the police had to drop the charges -- and in fact the boys did turn out to be innocent, and just this year an adult male who was arrested soon after that has pleaded guilty to this crime.

But it's illustrative, because in so many ways the story was so easy for the media to accept. And it raises a couple of characteristics or issues, I think, that come up in these kinds of stories. You've heard some of this before, but I think it bears repeating. There's a lack of understanding in the media of what goes on in these communities, and the folks who live in these communities. When something like this happens, we tend to parachute into a community and just do man-on-the-street interviews, woman-on-the-street interviews because we don't have any relationships, we don't have somebody who can call us and say, “this couldn't have happened.” We don't have the head of the mother's group, mothers who are working against crime that we can call and say, “do you know this family? Do you know anything about this?” We don’t have the information, we don’t have the sources.

There's a tendency for us to see young African-Americans, especially black males, as different from us, as “the other,” as in some ways dehumanized to the point where we could believe that two young boys like this could do something like that. Again, this goes back to stereotyping in the media and the way that African-Americans in particular are portrayed.

It also goes to our pack mentality -- the fact that when we get a hot story we gotta get there first and gotta be there all the time and we gotta, in many ways, report the same story without skepticism and without questioning. And again, these are the kinds of characteristics of the media that I think lead to the kinds of, either non-coverage, or distorted coverage of people of color.

The sourcing issue, I think, is really important here. Journalists don't know folks in these communities, they don't know where to go, they don't live in these communities. Black journalists, white journalists, journalists of all colors tend to be middle class, upper middle class, they tend to live -- if they live in an urban area -- they tend to live in the suburbs or in middle class communities that are often far away from these segregated communities. So, they don't know these neighborhoods, they don't live near these neighborhoods, they don't personally connect with these neighborhoods, and they don't know anybody else who does. So they don't have the right folks in place.

Ray Suarez mentioned earlier -- he talked a little bit about reality-based journalism -- and I thought it was really an interesting way to put it. I think it's another way of saying that journalists have forgotten how to get into neighborhoods and to deal with the reality rather than with symbolism. They don't actually go out and talk to people. Imagine that -- reporters used to go neighborhoods and wear out that good 'ole shoe leather, knocking on

doors, building relationships with people -- and not just going when there's a crisis or a terrible event, but going just to get to know folks, to build those relationships so then when something does happen, they have the contacts, they have the people.

As someone who has done a lot of training of journalists, both in academia and at The Chicago Reporter, I think they don't know how to get on the phone or get off the Internet, That's something that needs to be encouraged.

Another thing that pushes us away from the stereotyping and these negative one-dimensional stories is that we don't humanize people. Maury Possley, the reporter at the Tribune who was one of the first to raise questions about the Ryan Harris case, said that the thing that made him really start to question this was that he had a boy at home, a son, about the same age as those boys. And he started to think, would my boy be capable of this kind of thing? And I think again, because we're not in these neighborhoods because we don't connect or relate to these people, we don't think their stories are the same as ours.

So some of the kinds of stories that I'd like to see more often in the media that would get at some of this is, what's it like for a little boy growing up in Englewood every day?

We just had this incident in New York a couple weeks ago, with the police shooting -- not the first, unfortunately -- and it probably won't be the last. What's it like for a young black man to maneuver and navigate his way through a community day after day? What kinds of things does he have to do to protect himself from being singled out by the police? What kind of mechanisms have to be put into place? What does his mother tell him when he goes out the door every day? These kinds of nuts-and-bolts, day-to-day, in-the-life stories, I think, help connect us to the nation that, “Wow, these people live differently from me and no wonder they have these kinds of struggles!” You want to humanize these kinds of stories.

Terrence Smith mentioned Barack Obama as being maybe one of the solutions. Everybody thinks Barack Obama is going to be the solution to everything, it seems like, in this country. He is the rock star of all rock stars in politics of all time. He's Mr. Hope -- his new book is called “The Audacity of Hope.” Everyone thinks he's going to solve all of their problems.

I'd love to see a story about what it was like for Barack Obama growing up bi-racial in America, growing up in a mixed race and mixed cultural environment, what is was like for him walking down the streets of South Side Chicago before he was “Barack Obama” and how often he got stopped by police and questioned. A story like that humanizes race for people, it connects people to it.

I don't want to go over my time, so I will just tick off a few more solution-oriented things that -- again, have been mentioned before, but a little bit of a different twist. Minority journalists are needing to be supported in the newsroom and they're needing to be endorsedm and the work that they're trying to do needs to be endorsed. I think that the minority journalists’ organizations, organizations like NABJ, Unity -- all the journalists of color organizations could be doing more than they're doing to support the people they have in the newsroom.

I think it was DeWayne Wickham who mentioned that there's not enough of us in the newsroom. One of the things I'd love to see our groups sponsor or back a study. We all know this anecdotally, but we don't, you don't see the numbers. Newspapers don't want you to know how few people of color are in decision-making positions, or in influential positions in the newsroom -- I think there could be a study that could be done, maybe it has to be done paper by paper, city by city, but I think it would be very illuminating and would help build the case.

Again, on the sourcing issue -- I used to talk about something I call The Rolodex Mentality -- and I can't call it Rolodex anymore, because that's old hat, that's old media. I think I'll call it The Blackberry Mentality. Our sourcing is all about the people we already know who are in that Blackberry. We find sources that we trust, that we like, that respond to us, give us the good quotes we want and we don't go beyond that.

So again, we're caught short -- first of all, we're getting a very homogenous, very thin response when we talk to the same people over and over again -- they may be reliable, but they may not know everything. And I think there could be some work done around sourcing, helping journalists find those sources that they're missing -- a database of some kind that could be online that could get a journalist to the right people.

I'm just going to touch on one other, one or two other quick things that came up in the previous discussion. I really liked what DeWayne Wickham had to say about how we don't have some of the conversations that we should have, especially in the African-American and Latino and other communities of color. We don't like to talk about the problems that make us uncomfortable. We don't like to talk about crime and the fact that we're perpetrating a lot of the crime. Two words: Bill Cosby. Two more words: Dirty laundry. Bill Cosby -- whether you agree with him or not, raised a crucial issue that's been debated and is raging in the African-American community about the divide between the middle, the black middle class and the poor. That's something that makes us very uncomfortable, we don't like to talk about it.

The argument, I think, in communities of color is that when we expose our vulnerabilities, when we expose our faults, we make ourselves more vulnerable, we make ourselves more likely to be targets of racism. But if we don't get at these secrets, if we don't get at these flaws, how can we ever hope to address them? We have to be honest and open if we want to have any kind of credibility.

My last point has to do with Fox. There's been some mention of Fox TV and how it takes a conservative point of view, and how it takes an advocacy point of view, and I think there's nothing necessarily wrong with that. I think as journalists we've been taught that there's a thing called objectivity, that we have to be “fair and balanced,” to quote someone at Fox.

Well, there's really no such thing as objectivity, and if we really want to wipe out racism and we really want to attack this animal, we have to be honest that racism is a problem and that by working against racism, we're not being advocates, we're just simply telling the truth and getting those stories out there. And if they call us advocates, so be it. I just think that this whole myth of objectivity has kept us from many of these kinds of important stories that we need to be covering.

I'll stop there, and I look forward to the conversation.