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PART I

## I

## Introduction

*A Plea for Progressives to “Stay in the Room”*

When Kaleem Caire arrived back to his hometown of Madison, Wisc., in 2010 after working for President Obama on the Race to the Top education plan, he found a community little changed from the one he’d left years prior – at least in terms of the opportunities available to people of color.<sup>1</sup> He, his wife, and his five children – two girls and three boys – were African American. Yet, there in that midsized, college-dominated city, the achievement disparities between White, Black, and Brown people were some of the worst in the United States. African American and Latino students trailed their White counterparts at all education levels in areas such as reading test scores. One in every two Black males in Madison were failing to graduate high school in four years – compared to a graduation rate of 88 percent for their White counterparts. The situation seemed to get worse every year as more and more African Americans, Hispanics and other minorities enrolled in the local schools; minority groups comprised a majority of the Madison schools’ population. The thought of raising his kids in that environment dismayed the new head of the Urban League of

<sup>1</sup> A note about terminology: I have elected to use the more inclusive “people of color” as well as “Black,” “White,” “Brown” people in addition to more specific labels such as “African American” or “Hispanic” and “Latino” throughout this book (even as I honor that all of these terms encompass lots of different ethnicities and heritages). I am capitalizing these labels as a way to draw attention to race delineation. Please also note that this book focuses explicitly on Black-White (and sometimes Brown) relations, leaving out the many other racial dynamics in the cities to have more room to dive more deeply into what is happening. (In truth, this book is written for White people primarily.) As a White person still on her own racial journey, I am sure I’ve made a lot of mistakes and perhaps even offended people here and there. I am open to hearing about it so that I may continue my own awareness.

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Greater Madison and he was ready to effect change in a real way. While he was away, people had been working on the problem; committees had been formed, reports had been written. But political stalemate, financial uncertainty, inertia, and an unwillingness to redirect resources away from other student groups for 20 percent of the student population stymied any major solutions from being implemented. Caire rolled up his sleeves and set to work.

In September 2011, Kaleem Caire won a planning grant to develop a publicly funded charter school called Madison Preparatory Academy that would educate Black and Latino boys in grades 6–12. After much research, Caire had landed on what he considered to be the best alternative to the public schools. Madison Prep was modeled after Chicago Preparatory Academy and a variety of other charter schools across the country that seemed to be meeting the needs of Black children where public schools were failing. His first proposal (which changed several times over the year) at first excluded girls in order to focus on Wisconsin’s Black boys, who ended up in prison more frequently than in any other state. The students would wear uniforms, attend school for longer hours, and participate in summer learning activities. It would cost the district an additional \$4 million over the course of five years.<sup>2</sup> It wasn’t perfect, but Caire thought it was a stab at something, an experiment in a place that seemed to him to be badly in need of new ideas.

Caire needed the approval of the 2011 Madison Metropolitan School District’s seven-member Board of Education (BOE), made up of White, older progressives with the exception of one Black male. The BOE represented Madison voters (mostly White), not Madison kids (now a majority minority) and had historically had strong connections to the local teachers’ union. He also knew he needed the community of Madison behind him. The capital city of nearly 250,000 skewed liberal – indeed, it liked to brag about itself as the birthplace of the Progressive Party. Madison regularly appeared on “Best City” lists for its friendly community, livable environment, world-class education, bike paths, dog parks, and many other metrics. Its White citizens imagined themselves to be community oriented, volunteered in their kids’ schools, and donated to charity. If White people did not encounter many people of color during their commute to the university or their law office at the Capitol, they enjoyed hearing several

<sup>2</sup> This number would get pared down after a private donation and other changes came about to about \$2.7 million over the course of five years (the exact figure varies depending on the source ).

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languages spoken and many considered themselves color-blind. And these White residents were well off, with an average household income of \$61,000 and ranked as having the highest concentration of PhDs in the country.

Yet Madison, like many places in the world, harbored implicit biases and enacted institutionally racist policies. Cops picked up Black teens at a rate six times that of White teens. Employers passed over Black applicants such that the unemployment rate for Black people was 25.2 percent compared to just 4.8 percent for White people in 2011. Even the schools were disciplining Black children more harshly and frequently than the White kids, with a suspension ratio of 15 to 1.<sup>3</sup> And though many White people in town would bristle at the idea that such an intellectually progressive place could harbor such racial problems, the Black people I talked to for this book – without exception – described a segregated city where hostile environments were the norm for people of color.<sup>4</sup> Caire knew he had an uphill battle, not only in behind-the-scenes negotiating with school officials, but also in the public realm. He knew he’d encounter resistance and suspicion and defensiveness: He just wanted people to “stay in the room” to hear him out.

The proposal immediately generated controversy and a raging public debate ensued – borne out in local news outlets, education blogs, Facebook, and other social media. The Urban League of Greater Madison appealed for public support in YouTube videos, showing charts filled with achievement gap metrics. Local activists debated it in popular blogs with one linking to dozens of reports full of research evidence. Reporters covering the proposal wrote articles full of meeting logistics and he-said/she-said “evidence.” Hundreds of Madison citizens commented on Facebook posts and news articles, railing against Madison Prep or persuading BOE members to give the charter school a try, relaying personal stories, quoting experts, or citing blog posts. Caire spent much of his time posting upcoming hearings or newly released reports on charter schools on his Facebook page, emailing out messages that were picked up by blogs or local media, and answering phone calls from reporters.

On one level this book documents the story of Caire, Madison Prep, and the aftermath as it unfolded in the public sphere. As a White, liberal

<sup>3</sup> These statistics were compiled in a dramatic report by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families released in 2013: Erica Nelson and Lawrence Torrey Winn, “Race to Equity: A Project to Reduce Racial Disparities in Dane County” (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, 2013), <http://racetoequity.net/>.

<sup>4</sup> Check out Madison365 for more context on how Black and Brown people in Madison feel and fare, <http://madison365.com/>.

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professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as this narrative took shape, I had a front row seat to the onslaught of vitriolic commentary and stilted debate that occurred in the news media, on Facebook, on Twitter, and in the blogosphere. I read all of Caire’s public Facebook, Twitter, and blog posts and the intense discussions that followed. I watched the hearings where parent after parent talked about the marginalization of their children in the school systems and then I saw these same parents’ experiences discounted by other speakers. I noted the meeting-driven, he-said/she-said coverage in the local media. And overall, I became intrigued at the ineffective communicative patterns I saw, especially how important voices in the discussion about the achievement gap were ignored, suppressed, or completely absent. I began documenting how community information circulated on the issue via different media – social, traditional, and other. I was particularly interested in the quality of the material that was flowing so quickly, so voluminously, and wondered: how can public content about significant racial issues reflect inclusive, credible, meaningful information that could create healthier deliberation?

I began looking at other similar suburban-microcosms like Madison – Cambridge, Mass., Chapel Hill, N.C., Ann Arbor, Mich., and Evanston, Ill. – all of which were close to major universities, suffered under noxious racial achievement disparities, and were committed to resolving them. And all of them were hyperliberal, even progressive, and yet still had difficulty navigating the tricky discourse around race. In all of them, I and my research team found intense, ongoing public dialogues about the gaps between White people and Black and Brown people, combined with frustration and confusion about why things have not improved much, a lot of defensiveness, and a keen desire to “do better.” In all of them, we found excellent, well-meaning journalists whose coverage of disparities consistently failed to meet the expectations and hopes of many in and those supporting marginalized communities. In all of them, we found community leaders, activists, and would-be politicians writing in blogs and Facebook, to bypass media in posts that often ignited healthy debate even as they also advanced political careers for those ensconced in the dominant White progressive hegemony, shifted power networks, and helped amplify conversations that had once been private. This book explores how we can improve public dialogues about race in liberal cities that should be better at such conversations.

On a deeper level, this book portrays a grand theoretical view of what’s happening with evolving media ecologies and the public information exchange at the local community level during the digital age. The

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conversation about how new technologies network our social, political, economic, and other lives is well underway. Despite the optimism that digital networks will diffuse power through entrenched structures, scholarly evidence has shown how online networks act as echo chambers for the powerful. In these spaces, offline inequalities not only persist but are exacerbated in digital spaces.<sup>5</sup> This book joins that dialogue and takes up where those studies leave us, grappling with how new social-media tools are reconstituting these networks and how power flows through these information-exchange structures. Using case studies from across the nation, my main goal is to examine whether journalists and other content producers can adapt reconstituted networks for new conversations, in keen consideration of the existing infrastructure governed as it is by dominant power constructs, embedded hegemony, and long-established institutions. To do this, I document the emerging media ecology for Madison, Wisc., and the roles taking shape within it. I will use field theory (from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu) to help me explain the power structures within that ecology via the overlapping fields of information-exchange (journalism, education). And I will use some light network analysis as a methodology to help me visualize the ecology.

In this work I reveal meaningful connections, identify key influencers, and uncover the ways in which the scaffolding of the information structure can be manipulated to incorporate marginalized voices. I argue that entrenched identity constructs in these liberal cities prevent the healthy heeding and other necessary components of trust building for true deliberation. Those seeking to promote an alternative message use social-media networks to bypass mainstream journalists in order to spread their messages, build trust, and gain social and political capital. But, they can be stymied by their own isolation in the network or come up against mainstream ideological forces. In these progressive or highly liberal places in particular, the political landscape served to hamper rather than ameliorate conditions for discussions. This is ironic, given that one of the stalwart tenets of a progressive ideology is a commitment to freedom of the press and to the free flow of ideas in civil society. Healthy community and vibrant democracy, progressives believe, depend upon open communication. Yet many White people who thought of themselves as social-justice advocates

<sup>5</sup> boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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**Box 1.1 An interlude: The timeline of Madison Prep and its aftermath**

- Summer 2010: Kaleem Caire works with the Urban League of Greater Madison on a proposal for an all-boys charter school run by the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) for high school. In August, *The Capital Times* newspaper writes an article about the plan.
- Fall 2010: Caire hosts a large kickoff planning meeting for the school, asking for input from nearly three dozen community members on the details of the proposal. Several task forces are created to work on different aspects of the proposal.
- December 2010: The MMSD Board of Education (BOE) hears the initial proposal. It would be all-boys, they would wear uniforms, classes would be all day and through the summer.
- January 2011: The MMSD BOE asks follow-up questions of Caire on the proposal.
- February 2011: Madison Prep gets sponsorship from two BOE members, including the Black president of the board at the time, James Howard, to move Madison Prep forward into a more detailed plan. Caire begins work on a federal planning grant application. During this same time period, protests erupt at the state Capitol as hundreds of thousands of people turn out to condemn Gov. Scott Walker’s assault on public unions, including school teachers. The Madison Teachers’ Union is dealt a devastating blow as Act 10 takes away its collective bargaining power.
- March 2011: The MMSD BOE voted 6 to 1 to approve that \$225,000 grant application. Caire puts together a team of leaders for the school, embarking on numerous meetings to persuade key influencers in the city of Madison Prep’s merits.
- Summer 2011: Caire changes his proposal multiple times in response to critique from the Madison Teachers’ Union and BOE members. For example, the school went from being all-boys to co-ed, and he relents on demanding that all teachers be nonunion (holding strong on the mandate that the school’s counselors and social workers be of color).
- September 2011: Caire wins the planning grant. He closes a meeting to discuss Madison’s achievement disparities to media

Box 1.1 (cont.)

- and receives much pushback from local progressives and journalists.
- December 19, 2011: The BOE hears public input for several hours before voting no to Madison Prep, 5 to 2. A follow-up motion to extend discussion of Madison Prep gets rejected as well. Caire vows to try to open it as a private school.
  - March 2012: Superintendent Dan Nerad announces he will step down and leave Madison.
  - April 2012: Arlene Silveira, who had opposed Madison Prep, wins reelection to the BOE, but Trek Bicycle Inc. executive Mary Burke (who was going to give Madison Prep \$2.5 million to offset per-pupil expenditures and make the school more palatable to the BOE) won a seat. Two years later Burke ran against Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker for governor (and lost).
  - June: 2012: Nerad’s \$12.4 million plan to address Madison’s achievement disparities gets chopped. The BOE passes a \$4.4 million in initiatives (most of which merely enhanced those already in place).
  - January 2013: A primary race to replace BOE member Maya Cole becomes intense as a Latina, Ananda Mirilli, challenges two long-time White progressive activists in the city – Sarah Manski (whose husband was a leader in Progressive Dane) and TJ Mertz, a blogger and education history professor (also a member of Progressive Dane).
  - February 2013: Manski announces the day after she won the primary, with Mertz coming in second, that she was actually moving to California. People in the city cry foul with some hinting that the announcement was purposefully delayed until after the vote as an orchestrated move to keep a person of color who supported Madison Prep off the board.
  - March 31, 2013: The BOE election is held with Mertz uncontested on the ballot. Despite a write-in campaign for Mirilli, Mertz wins.
  - Spring 2013: BOE hires Jennifer Cheatham, a new superintendent who comes from Chicago with a major initiative to resolve K–12 racial gaps.



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Box 1.1 (cont.)

- October 2013: The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families release the “Race to Equity: A Baseline Report on the State of Racial Disparities in Dane County” that shows Madison’s county to be among the worst in the nation on many metrics, including employment, education, and criminal justice.
- December 2013: *The Capital Times* invites African American Rev. Alexander Gee to write a front-page column about his experiences as a Black man in Madison. This column is followed by another one by African American Michael Johnson. Also, a White BOE member who had voted against Madison Prep wrote a mea culpa, describing himself as “swimming in the water of White privilege.”
- February 2014: The first meeting of what would become a movement called “Justified Anger” is held with eight hundred people coming together to talk about race in Madison. The next few years followed dozens of forums, training initiatives for White people in social justice, and other initiatives in the community. The Evjue Foundation, which owns half of *The Capital Times*, donates Justified Anger \$20,000 in May 2014. The media organization joins with Wisconsin Public Radio to hold another forum on race in Madison, moderated by award-winning journalist Keith Woods from National Public Radio.
- April 2014: *The Capital Times* announces a dedicated website called “Together Apart” to aggregate stories about race. It includes a history of African Americans in Madison.
- September 2014: Superintendent Cheatham implements a new discipline policy in the schools, replacing a zero-tolerance program that disproportionately affected students of color.
- March 2015: An 18-year-old biracial man named Tony Robinson who is unarmed is killed by a White Madison cop. Protests erupt.
- June 2015: The Evjue Foundation awards another \$150,000 to Justified Anger.
- Summer 2015: The founders of Madison 365 begin fundraising for a news site about communities of color and issues of race. A Kickstarter campaign nets \$10,000 and they go online in August 2015.

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became defensive and hostile when forced to confront how White privilege had informed liberal policies, such as in the public schools, and led to exacerbated disparities. Though rich, deliberative conversations were happening on digital platforms in public spaces in most of these cities, many of them existed in isolated silos of talk away from the eyes and ears of major policymakers – and this effect is exacerbated in cities with decreasing media coverage. Essentially I am arguing that progressive ideologies become doxic (in field theory language) in the information-exchange fields. And those who practice progressivism in these places are governed so closely by this doxic mentality that they fail to see how exclusive the politics can be when exercised according to established norms of a place. That is, the thought leaders in these cities have accumulated so much political and civic capital through their networks that they can dictate what information circulates – and how it gets circulated. In the conclusion, however, rather than advocating for radical revolution, I consider how a careful recommitment to the ideal of progressivism with digital tools like social media and an understanding of networked, mediated ecologies can build the necessary social capital to shift these problematic dynamics.

Here, it may be useful to unpack the term “progressive” politics as it is employed in this book. In Wisconsin, almost 20 percent of its residents identified as “progressive,” and it still had a small organization (called Progressive Dane) that ran campaigns. The label “progressive” emerged in all of my datasets in all the other cities as well. Conceptually, progressivism stems from the early-1900s Progressive Era of American politics. The excesses of capitalism, which emphasized individual economic success, were reined in by reforms that emphasized collective democratic governance and the revitalization of middle-class workers.<sup>6</sup> The foundation of this concept was that “Progressives were not revolutionists, it was also an attempt to work out a strategy for orderly social change.”<sup>7</sup> Progressivism focuses on “improving the lives of others” and presumes that “human beings were decent by nature, but that people’s and society’s problems lay in the structure of institutions.”<sup>8</sup> Social stratification and inequality were not predetermined by biology, history, or some other ontological

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement, 1900–1915* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963); Lynn D. Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Hofstadter, *The Progressive Movement, 1900–1915*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Aldridge D. P., “Of Victorianism, Civilizationism, and Progressivism: The Educational Ideas of Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. Du Bois, 1892–1940,” *History of Education Quarterly* 47(4)(2007): 443, doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2007.00108.x.