



free-range THINKING™

free-range thinking™ is a monthly journal of best practices, resources and generally useful stuff for public interest communicators who want to reach more people with more impact



In a Time of Too Much TV, "America to Me" Deserves Your Attention

If you've never heard of "America to Me," join the club. The ten-part documentary series debuted on Starz in August, attracted rapturous reviews (according to Metacritic, it was the best reviewed new show in all of 2018), but the ratings were abysmal. The series attracted only 259,000 viewers over its first seven days of release. (A recent edition of "60 Minutes," in contrast, drew slightly more than seven million viewers, and that was for a *rerun*.)

I stumbled across it while scrolling through TV shows in the iTunes store. I was intrigued by the description - "a year-long immersion into one of Chicago's most progressive and diverse public schools" - and I was sold by the driving force behind it: Steve James, director of the Oscar-nominated documentary, "Hoop Dreams." Having watched all ten hours - and some episodes twice - I fully understand why James Poniewozik, television reviewer for *The New York Times*, selected it as one of the ten best shows of 2018.

"America to Me" is not just for those who care about kids, public education, or the state of race relations in this country. It is a master class in storytelling, well worth the time of anyone who recognizes the power of story to illuminate issues in ways that numbers alone never can. [Full Story](#). Please note: Apple Mail users may need to scroll down manually.

About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Celia Hoffman. To read back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.thegoodmancenter.com.

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Can I be *frank* with you?


The sixth annual *frank* conference will be held February 5-8, 2019 in Gainesville, and I hope to see you there. *frank* is a unique gathering of public interest communicators, academicians, thought-leaders and change-makers that also happens to be my favorite conference each year (and believe me, I go to plenty.)



This time around *frank* will focus on space: reimagining it. Letting it be. Creating it. Bringing others in. Closing the space between us. Featured speakers include:

- **Maytha Alhassen**, a historian, journalist, social justice artist, and author of "Haqq and Hollywood: Illuminating 100 Years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them," which documents the cinematic history of depicting Muslims
- **Shawn Taylor** of Nerds of Color, a community of fans who love superheroes, sci-fi, fantasy and video games and are not afraid to look at nerd/geek fandom with a culturally critical eye
- **Saket Soni**, co-founder of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice. Saket led the organization to win precedent-setting National Labor Relations Board decisions protecting migrant whistleblowers on the front lines of the hospitality and seafood industries from retaliatory firings and blacklisting. And many more!

frank is an invitation-only event, but please consider this to be your invite. To join us in February, register [here](#). Your password is Spaceforfrank.



Upcoming online classes at The Goodman Center

<p>TELL BETTER STORIES</p> <p>Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative</p> <p>January 10, 17, 24 & 31 9am - 10am PT</p>	<p>WEBINAR BETTER</p> <p>The Webinar on Webinars</p> <p>January 18 11am - 12pm PT</p>	<p>DESIGN BETTER CAMPAIGNS</p> <p>Strategic Communications: Cutting Through the Clutter</p> <p>February 14 & 15 11am - 12pm PT</p>
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In a Time of Too Much TV, "America to Me" Deserves Your Attention (*continued*)

In 2016, Steve James and his team of documentary filmmakers were given permission to capture a full year at Oak Park and River Forest High School (OPRF) in suburban Chicago. In many ways, both the school and the surrounding community were ideal settings for an exploration of the impacts, both obvious and subtle, of systemic racism on public education in America.

James had sent his three children to OPRF, so he was already intimately familiar with the school as both a parent and community resident. OPRF has a diverse student population: 55% white, 27% African American, 9% Latinx, 6% biracial, and 3% Asian. While the faculty is predominantly white, the school's principal is African American, the superintendent is Asian, and the language of diversity, equity and inclusion is spoken fluently at school board meetings.



Steve James

The school is an accurate reflection of the greater Oak Park community. As Sophie Gilbert wrote in her review of the series in *The Atlantic*, "...in the liberal village of Oak Park...community leaders in the 1950s and '60s resisted white flight and redlining to keep the area integrated. The white residents who left were mostly older and conservative, while the white people who moved in were younger and liberal, hopeful that they could play a part in 'an American experiment in true diversity.'"

OPRF is also an accurate reflection of a sorry truth playing out in schools across America, one that James pronounces in voiceover: "Diversity is not the same as equity." Despite its impressive 94% graduation rate, OPRF has a persistent achievement gap between its white and African American students. In the series first episode, we learn about a study that shows white students doing better on ACT tests than African American students - a gap that has actually widened over the last 15 years.

How could this happen in a progressive community like Oak Park and at a school where the faculty and administration clearly care about the students? That is the central question that drove James and his documentary team deep into the life of the school, its students, and their families. Over the course of a school year, the filmmakers shot 1,300 hours of footage, and in distilling that material into a 10-hour series, they have told an eye opening, heartbreaking and unforgettable story about the insufficiency of good intentions.



Jada speaks to her peers © STARZ

"Me" spends enough time with its subjects that their complexities and vulnerabilities are on full display, and we can't help caring about them as a result. As Melanie McFarland wrote in *Salon*, "the kids *America to Me* introduces to us are so wholly and completely themselves that emotional separation from their stories is impossible."

Along with compelling characters, there is a plethora of drama and conflict, the twin engines of storytelling. A year in any school will give you plenty of both, and James takes full advantage of the predictable moments: slam poetry competitions, wrestling matches, final exams. What makes "America to Me" so exceptional, however, are the raw and unexpected moments that make you wonder if the subjects simply forgot they were being filmed. Just watch Mr. Podolner, a white physics teacher, in his cringe-inducing attempts to relate to African American students in his class, and you'll know exactly what I mean.

Good storytelling won't let you go, and "America to Me" is no exception. That's why even now, a week after completing the series, my heart still goes out to Ke'Shawn, who radiates charisma and promise but whose unstable home life makes it hard for him to bring his best self to class. I'm worried about Kendale, who earned a wrestling scholarship to Columbia College in Iowa - how will he fare in a less diverse environment far from the support systems at home? I'm still impressed with Jada, whose intelligence and self-possession makes me think we'll be hearing from her down the road. And Terrence - well, you'll just have to watch the show to understand why I still choke up thinking about the episode in which he gives his mother a bracelet he made for her at school.

Most of all, though, I cannot help thinking about the larger story of racism in America, whether it rears its head in schools, in law enforcement, in the business world, and - despite best intentions once again - in my own attitudes and actions. To my mind, that is the ultimate triumph of great storytelling: even as it dwells in small moments and the particulars of a few lives, it helps us see the big picture (and our place in it) in new ways.



Kendale embraces his bandmates © STARZ

"America to Me" can be watched on demand on the premium cable channel Starz, or individual episodes can be downloaded from iTunes or Amazon. The series title, in case you're wondering, come from the Langston Hughes poem, "Let America be America Again," which includes the refrain, "America never was America to me."

[^ back to top](#)



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