



The Media Diversity Institute

General tips on reporting diversity

One of the most important tasks that journalists face is to write about people who are unlike themselves in fundamental ways. Whether a source is of another ethnicity, religious faith, sexual orientation, social class, or economic status, the role of the journalist is often to convey accurately that person's perspective, ideas or worldview—even when the differences are profound.

Tips for finding sources

Some strategies relate mainly to specific groups or types of difference. But the following suggestions apply across the board:

*When you write a story about an ethnic, social, religious or other minority, it is extremely important to interview representatives of that group and include their perspectives in the piece. Otherwise, they are the 'objects' of the article rather than the 'subjects'. No article should criticise an entire group of people without offering members of that group an opportunity to present its own point of view and respond to accusations.

*Be careful in your use of words and expressions. Words have a great power to hurt as well as to heal. Careless use of language can increase ethnic and social tensions, even if that is not what you mean to do. Be aware of how members of a minority prefer to be called in the language in which you are writing. Albanians refer to themselves as "Shiptars", for example, but when used in Slavic languages this is considered a derogatory word.

*As you gather material, try to recognise any biases or prejudices you may have. Of course you will have your own opinions, but part of the role of journalism is to question your own and society's preconceived ideas. Many of the beliefs held by one group about another are based not on facts but on stereotypes, although often the stereotypes include an element of truth. For example, some gay men are effeminate (as are some straight men) but most are not.

*Be careful when you use phrases like "as everyone knows" or "it is evident that." This sort of expression is usually the way journalists introduce their own biases or those of their own social group, and whatever it is that "everyone knows" is as likely to be false or based on prejudice as it is to reflect a real understanding of the facts of a particular situation.

*Most situations involving conflicts between social groups are complicated. Both sides generally have legitimate complaints and perspectives, and presenting those perspectives fairly and accurately is an important part of the journalist's role. Try not to present difficult social questions in black-and-white terms.

*Including people of different backgrounds is not just a question of fairness and balance it is important for the media from a business perspective as well. Many media outlets limit their potential audience by presenting only the perspective of a single group. If they make an effort to expand coverage to highlight other communities, they can also expand their audience at the same time.

*Take care to provide some context for the events you are covering. Ethnic, religious and other social struggles do not arise out of nothing. Usually there is a long history of conflict, with each side differing widely in its interpretations of the past. Before you can fairly present the material, you must understand what has come before and then you must decide how much of the past you need to include for readers to grasp the essential points.

*Find unusual ways to write about the issues. Spend a whole day with a homeless person, a lesbian or a refugee to understand what their lives are really like. What are their hopes and fears? Do they conform to your stereotypes or not? If a social group objects to the use of a particular word to describe its members, explore the history of that word. What associations and ideas does it communicate when it is used? Why do people object to it? Why do members of another social group continue to use it?

*Cultivate sources in other communities. Find people who are willing to keep you informed about what members of their social groups are thinking about, talking about, worrying about. Make contact with non-governmental organisations that represent these communities and ask them what aspects of their lives have not yet been covered. Ask them to keep in touch with you about political, social, economic and other developments that you might not otherwise hear about.

*Be sceptical. Check facts. You should not accept at face value everything that you hear, whether it comes from a member of your own or another community. Remember that everybody you talk to or interview has a point of view and a particular interest. You need to take their perspective into consideration, but you need to balance it with what you hear from others and what you can observe on your own.

*Do not treat ethnic and other minorities as monolithic. Even though it may look from the outside as if all members of a community have a single perspective, life is never so simple. When one group views another as acting as a solid entity, it can greatly exacerbate tensions by feeding the perception that others are to be feared. Talk to as many people as possible within other social groups and present a range of views in as nuanced and clear a manner as possible.

*Many people have strong negative feelings about different social groups. Just because some authorities, politicians, clerics, and others may use offensive terms and expressions when discussing minorities, this does not mean you are required, as a journalist, to include this sort of insulting language in your material. If necessary, paraphrase their words. If you decide to quote them directly, you should mention that members of the minority being discussed consider such language to be insulting and inflammatory.

Tips on interviewing people from other groups

*Be sensitive and thoughtful. Understand that people who are different from you may be scared about talking to a journalist, even if it is not the first time they have done so. To put them at ease, you might start off the conversation with “small talk”—about their families, their work life, hobbies, and so on. This will help them feel comfortable. It will let them know that you view them as more than just a representative of a minority, that you recognise that they have other aspects of their lives.

*Make sure you understand any conditions they may have placed on the interview. Clarify whether or not they mind having their name used. Or perhaps they do not mind using a first name, but would prefer that you not mention their last name, their town, or other details that might identify them. Accept their requests and do not try to persuade them otherwise.

*If you have a choice of where to interview them, decide on a place where they feel comfortable. It is often best to interview people in their own environment—their apartment or office, for example—because that is where they feel most relaxed. It also helps you to understand their perspective because you can experience them in their normal surroundings, and they may reveal things they would not in a more formal or unfamiliar setting.

*Let them tell you their story in their own way. If they want to start with what happened five or 10 years ago, let them, even if it seems to you that it is not exactly relevant to what you want to know. Try to schedule enough time with them so you do not have to pressure them to get quickly to the point. People often feel more relaxed about discussing something close to their hearts when they have the freedom to speak at length.

*Write up a list of questions beforehand, but use it as a general guide rather than something you have to stick to strictly. As you ask your questions, you should listen carefully to what they say, so that you are open to other approaches. Be flexible. If you are too attached to your own ideas of what the interview should be about, you may not recognise those moments when your sources mention important but subtle aspects of the problem that you have not been aware of previously.

*No matter how different they are from you, do not preach to them about how they should live their lives. If you approach them with a judgmental attitude, they are likely to sense that immediately and will probably not feel comfortable talking to you or trust you to use the information sensitively. They understand their situation much better than you do – which is why you are interested in interviewing them.

*Try to acknowledge to yourself any biases or prejudices you have about the minority they belong to—and then try to put those ideas aside when interviewing people and preparing your story. If you have a stereotyped perspective of the people you are writing about but do not recognise it, you are likely to demonstrate that bias in both your questions and your writing.

*Remember that your sources are experts. An expert is not just a doctor or scientist. Your sources are experts on their own lives. Do not assume that you know what they will tell you, because then you won't be open for any surprises. You want them to describe their lives and experience to you – and your job is to convey that to your audience.

*At the end of the conversation, ask if they know any other people who might be willing to be interviewed. This can be an important method of finding other sources for this or future articles. Of course, the more sensitive you are while interviewing them, the more likely they are to feel comfortable referring you to someone else.

*Above all, be careful how you use the information. When someone agrees to talk to you, they are doing you a great favour. When you write about them, do so with care and compassion. It is easy to frighten members of your audience when you report about people from a different background by using stereotypes, inflammatory or derogatory language, unverified information, and other biased material. Your role, however, is to help your audience understand other people and empathise with rather than fear them.

Tips on covering ethnicity

Ethnic divisions clearly played a highly destructive role in the recent wars and conflicts of South East Europe. While religious and other factors also fuelled tensions, it was the perception of people as “other” due to their ethnicity that generated the most violent and aggressive passions—which, in turn, led to the devastating tragedies of the 1990s.

Unfortunately, journalists and their media organisations have frequently found themselves placed in an extremely delicate and sometimes impossible position. As members of a particular ethnic community, they have found it difficult to maintain a stance of journalistic objectivity, often because of overwhelming political and social pressures. Instead, they have often viewed their role as defenders of the interests of their specific ethnic group rather than as observers seeking to understand the full complexities of the situation at hand.

The coverage has often reflected this bias by painting rival ethnic groups as uniformly bloodthirsty, evil, and completely to blame for the conflict. Journalists have routinely perpetuated negative stereotypes, ignored root social and political causes of the conflicts, made no efforts to interview anyone who does not share the majority point of view, and failed to place events in a context that would encourage a broader understanding.

To help journalists hope to play a role in fostering reconciliation and respect for ethnic differences, here are some critical suggestions:

*Never write a story without interviewing people who have a range of positions on the debate. Any material developed solely from one perspective is inherently biased. If your sources criticise

an entire ethnic group, representatives of that group should be offered an opportunity to respond to the charges. Otherwise, the journalist simply becomes a propaganda mouthpiece for one side.

*Pay close attention to your choice of words and expressions. Avoid derogatory phrases commonly used to refer to people of other ethnicities. If you quote people who use such expressions, consider paraphrasing them instead of citing them directly. This can be a sensitive area, because some words may be offensive in one language but not in another, so it is part of your job as a journalist to understand the nuances. If you are not sure whether an expression is considered derogatory, ask the people being talked about how they feel about it.

*Develop sources in ethnic communities other than your own. Call up NGOs (non-governmental organisations) representing their interests and ask to meet with them. Ask them about their concerns, hopes, traditions, and fears. Spend time at cultural and social institutions where they gather—community centres, schools, theatres, wherever—and talk to as many people as you can. Immersing yourself in their milieu, however uncomfortable it may be at first, is the best way to develop a real understanding of their perspective.

*Look inside yourself so you can recognise any prejudices you yourself may have. Everyone has preconceived notions, whether conscious or not, about members of other social groups. While this is completely understandable, the most effective and accurate reporting depends upon the ability to acknowledge these biases and put them aside. That is the only way to really hear what people are telling you about their lives and feelings.

*Make sure you place events and situations in context rather than just focusing on who attacked whom yesterday. Nothing happens out of the blue. When ethnic disputes and conflicts erupt, journalists frequently treat each incident as if it has taken place in isolation. But both sides usually have their own interpretations of how matters have arrived at the current moment. In order to present material fairly, you should understand this history and include enough background so that the audience recognises the real complexities.

*Talk to people on both sides other than those who present themselves as leaders. Often, men, women and children on the ground have a far different view of what is going on than those who presume to speak or act for the entire group. What is it they really want? Ask them if the strategies being pursued in their name are, in their view, the most effective ways to achieve their goals.

*Focus not just on the visible and obvious effects of ethnic fighting but on the less apparent consequences as well. What kind of long-lasting psychological traumas are taking place? What is the consequence of the conflict in the social and economic spheres? What are the implications for the future of what is taking place today?

*In your reporting from both sides, try to determine where there is common ground—and then highlight those elements. It is easy to find people willing to demonise those from another ethnic group. But a reporter who digs a little more deeply and asks probing questions may find that, in fact, the goals professed by those on both sides of the divide may not be as different as the people themselves believe.

*Try focusing on the emotions of non-combatants as well as the actual events on the ground. We are all human, after all, and it is often easier for members of one social group to empathise with the fears and pain of civilians on the other side than with the inflammatory or aggressive statements of generals and politicians. Most people can empathise with the death of a child or parent, with the loss of a home or of a sense of hope.

*Do not assume that each side has a monolithic reality and that everybody is of one mind. Every community will have dissenters from the majority position. Some people may be afraid to express themselves for fear of reprisals from neighbours, politicians or others. But you should always be

aware that other factions exist even in seemingly cohesive societies—and you should make a concerted effort to find them and present their perspective.

*Try to describe events accurately and cite the sources of your information instead of relying on inflammatory adjectives like "brutal", "inhuman", and "barbaric". Journalists often fall back on such expressions as a way of demonising one side and, whether intentionally or not, goading the other side to perpetuate the cycle of violence. In doing so, they are generally fulfilling the goals and disseminating the views of just one party to the conflict.

*Remember to be sceptical. Do not let yourself be used or manipulated by those on either side of the conflict. Check every fact to the fullest extent possible. If you cannot be totally sure whether something is accurate, either do not include the information or attribute it to your source rather than presenting it as the truth. When evaluating what you hear, take into account the source's reliability in the past. Provide the audience with as much detail as possible about your informants and their motivations so that people can judge for themselves how reliable they might be.

*Ignore appeals from authorities and others demanding that you demonstrate what they deem sufficient "loyalty" or "ethnic solidarity." Your role should not be to perpetuate racist stereotypes, act as a cheerleader for one side, or disseminate unconfirmed rumours that could promote extremist actions. Your loyalty and solidarity belong to your audience, for whom you are supposed to be gathering the most thorough and accurate information possible.

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