

AN RJI FELLOWSHIP PROJECT

10

Steps to More Inclusive Reporting

by Melba Newsome





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When I submitted a proposal for increasing source diversity for a **Reynolds Journalism Institute Fellowship**, I had little confidence I would be selected as a fellow and had no idea how relevant or timely the project would be.

Inclusive reporting has long been essential to pursuing and publishing the kinds of stories that inform and have long term relevance but in 2020, our entire industry would be challenged to bring more diverse voices into the conversation. Editors and publishers across the country made a concerted effort to hire more Black reporters, include more Black authoritative voices, and recount the real life experiences of people of color impacted by systemic racism.

The landscape is fraught with challenges stemming from differences in culture, privilege and power. Responsible reporting requires a focus on diversity, inclusivity, equity and justice.

Our writing has the potential to shape the public's perception of the social and political realities so we must be committed to soliciting and including a variety of voices and perspectives on successes and challenges across the landscape.

Like the people we report on, journalists are also liberal and conservative, economically privileged and disadvantaged, rural and urban. In the absence of opportunities to reflect on our identities, we can miss our own blind spots around preconceived stereotypes and assumptions about individuals and groups. It is our responsibility to provide fair and equitable reporting of the issues, people and communities we cover. This is not the whole of what we can do but it is the beginning of what we must do.



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Identifying the challenges with inclusive storytelling

Despite a recognition of the need for more diverse voices in their coverage, media partners WFAE, the *Charlotte Observer* and *NC Health News* identified the challenges in integrating diverse sources.

Too rolodex-reliant.

Seasoned reporters get into the habit of calling the same sources repeatedly because they know they can get a response and a good quote. New reporters who have a small or nonexistent source network may ask long time reporters for contacts, which reinforces the habit we hope to break.

Reacting instead of reporting.

Reporters may tend to be more reactive to events, instead of unearthing new stories through regular engagement with their community. It's important to understand the communities you cover so that you have a more solid base of understanding when a big story happens in that community.

"Diverse" but not different.

While media outlets may make an effort to include diverse guests and panelists, there is a tendency to rely on the same voices. The tendency is to go with a tried and true commodity but that's not really expanding the circle of voices and perspectives since a Black voice is not representative of all Black voices. Expand that circle by asking regular contributors who they know.

Getting past the gatekeepers.

The institutional gatekeepers have their list of spokespeople on offer and tend to put the same people forward for all media requests. It's incumbent on reporters to request someone different.

Rethinking Expertise

The AP/Expert News survey noted that sourcing experts remains a time-consuming process; it takes a journalist two hours on average to secure an expert for an interview. The need for diversity only exacerbates the problem.

“I have a beat where **95% of the decisions** I cover are made by white men,” said one reporter. “In many cases, the people who are in power are not diverse,” said another.

So how do journalists identify experts and go about finding experts to interview? Sometimes we need to broaden the definition of whom we consider experts. If include lived experience

and people who are impacted by the issues, this greatly expands the number and kinds of voices we can include in our reporting.

A real difference can be made in determining how we find these experts. Most journalists reported relying on PR agencies, universities, and online and social media searches. The Internet and social media make it easier to reach beyond the usual suspects but only if we broaden the search to include things like researchers at HBCUs and people who may have been quoted in media targeted to underrepresented populations.

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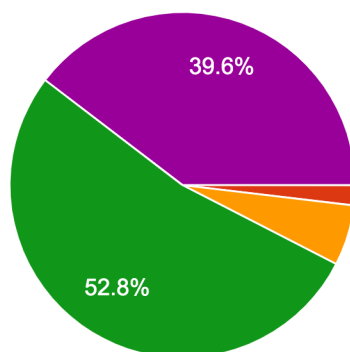
Survey Says:

What Reporters Think About Diversity

Journalists participating in the diversity in sourcing project took part in a 10-question survey to determine, among other things, their views on diversity in reporting and how this impacts their reporting. *Here are the topline takeaways:*

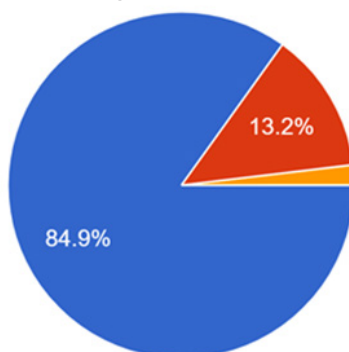
- Race and ethnicity is considered the most important factor in diversity
- More than 90% either make diversity a top priority or try to include it when it seems natural

On a scale of 1 to 5, how important is source diversity in your reporting?



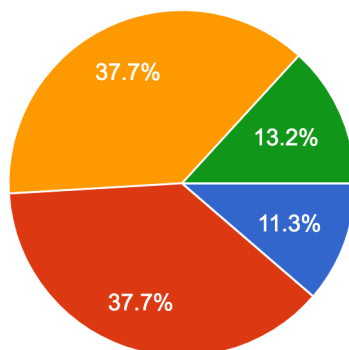
- 1 - It's not something I consider.
- 2 - I'm open to it when it happens normally.
- 3 - I'm fine with it, but it's not a top priority.
- 4 - I try to include diversity in stories where it seems natural.
- 5 - Diversity is a priority for every story.

How do you feel about the increased call for more BIPOC journalists and perspectives in the media?



- It's great and very much needed.
- It's good to have.
- I'm not sure it will make a difference.
- I think it's going a bit overboard.
- It's a form of reverse discrimination.

How often do you specifically request an expert or authority of color?



- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- All the time

The why of **source diversity** and inclusive storytelling



UNSPLASH PHOTO BY TIM MOSSHOLDER

Journalistic diversity makes for a good, more profitable business model. To remain relevant and reach new and changing audiences, news organizations should feature diversity in all its forms.

Readers notice and appreciate content that speaks to or serves their identity. If you rely on the same people or resources, chances are you're missing an opportunity to expand your audience and may be overlooking important stories that just haven't percolated up yet. Don't get scooped because you're ignoring certain people or communities.

Good journalism covers the full spectrum of people, places, policies and positions. Inclusive journalism does that.

Diversity is a Necessity, Not a Nicety

Inclusive reporting satisfies the journalistic imperative to fuel democracy because it doesn't just cater to the powerful, prominent and well-connected

It's good to conduct periodic audits to see if the published content includes diverse sources. But the examination shouldn't be limited to the numbers. Check to see if the coverage skews a certain way. Is a particular group and a particular topic always linked? For example, are Latinos only covered in immigration, bilingual education and farm labor stories? How often do you use female business or medical experts if gender is irrelevant to the topic.



Where to find diverse sources

Since there's nothing new under the sun, it stands to reason that there are already a lot of widely available databases for finding diverse sources. These are just a few.

People of Color Also Know Stuff

includes a database of experts in various fields, including political science, psychology, and public health along with their professional affiliations, research interests, and contact information.

Diverse Sources

is a searchable database of scientific experts from underrepresented communities.

Search NPR's **Source of the Week** database alphabetically or by location for experts from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in any field you can imagine.

HARO

(Help a Reporter Out) connects journalists with experts and sources. Specify the type of expert or real person you're looking for and your request will be distributed among HARO's thousands of subscribers for a response.

The **Database of Diverse Databases** is the mother of all databases. Curated by editors of color, no matter what kind of expert you're seeking — health, medicine, music, photography, political science, food — you're likely to find him or her here.

Build your own database

If you're reporting locally, gather your own list of go-to sources for the type of stories you cover.

Most non-profits, trade groups, churches and community service organizations have hundreds of members, many of whom are eager to speak with the media to get their message out. Identify the ones in your area and connect with them depending on your need.

HBCUs Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are a great resource for diverse researchers and experts.

There are alumni chapters of the nine Black Greek-letter sorority and fraternity in most US cities. Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, Iota Phi Theta, Kappa Alpha Psi, Sigma Gamma Rho, Phi Beta Sigma, and Omega Psi Phi. Because most are engaged in civic, social and political activities, these organizations are a good way to find college educated Black people for just about any story.

The **32 tribal colleges and universities** across the country are federally chartered institutions located on or near Indian reservations. They provide a way for Native American students to access higher ed-

ucation and are also a great, underused resource for finding indigenous experts and opinions for your stories.

Browsing Twitter, Facebook or Instagram will likely turn up people of any race, educational background, political persuasion you need.

If you're covering a topic that has garnered a lot of interest, chances are members of the general public have voiced their opinions in public forums. Search the public record for the names of people who have testified at legislative hearings, spoken at city or county council meetings or written letters to the opinion pages of local publications.

While much of the focus has been on diversifying sources in written reporting, photographs are equally important storytelling that should reflect your community. **Diversify Photo** is a database of BIPOC and non-western photographers, editors, and visual producers media outlets can use to find visual storytellers. As we say, one picture is worth a thousand words.

Track Your Progress

Tracking who actually shows up in the reporting is vital to the source diversity equation in journalism.

We may think our reporting is more inclusive but the numbers often tell a different story. When NPR first looked at source diversity back in 2013, they found that whites made up 80% of the on-air voices. This prompted the non-profit news organization to launch a multi-pronged course correction effort.

Five years later, rather than reflecting progress, the 2018 audit showed that the percentage of whites' voices had actually increased to 83%. The share of Latino voices remained flat at 6%, while black voices fell by 3% to 8% and Asian

voices saw a 2% decline to just 6%. There weren't enough indigenous people to even register.

Just asking reporters to collect demographic information about their sources can move the needle toward more diverse voices. Tracking sources is a way to hold us accountable. There is widespread agreement that keeping a daily or weekly count of who's in the stories has an immediate effect on gender and racial/ethnic diversity.

Prioritizing workforce diversity, the diversity of the stories we tell and the voices we choose to include is the best and most direct way to increase audience diversity. Documenting that information is also the best way to make sure we're making progress in those endeavors.

**You can
start today
with
two
simple
steps**

1. Ask your interviewees a few more post-interview demographic questions. **Here's how an NPR station in Wisconsin is doing it.**
2. Keep a daily or weekly record of who's in your pieces.

Understanding the Barriers

Lack of Trust.

Recent media analyses have found that there is a trust deficit between Blacks and the media, as well as opportunities for improvement and trust building. An August 2019 Pew Research survey found that 80 percent of Black adults expect that national news stories will be accurate. But a 2020 study from the Center for Media Engagement at UT Austin's Moody College of Communication revealed they aren't nearly as trusting about how the media portrays Black communities.

The parachute factor.

Reporters who parachute into a community to cover a volatile situation, without any established ties or understanding of that community, are likely to encounter indifference at best and hostility at worst. When people and communities are only news because they are in crisis, this paints an incomplete and/or one-sided portrait. Try to build relationships before a crisis arises and show gratitude for the people who share their relationships and stories.

The Burden of Tokenism.

Last summer's social justice protests prompted a sustained media focus on the ways systemic racism plays out in many sectors of American life, including police brutality, healthcare, employment and education. Researchers who had been studying and writing about these issues for years, with little interest from mainstream media, suddenly found their dance cards full.

Even those who had been denied space or a voice in established institutions and academic publications were suddenly bombarded with requests for media interviews, opportunities to participate in think tank forums, or asked for guidance about what steps to take to correct past wrongs. These entreaties from well-funded organizations and white reporters mostly came without any offer of compensation. It felt like tokenism to many.

Fear of Harassment.

Experts and academics, especially people of color, may be reluctant to share their opinions in the media for fear of backlash. Being willing to open yourself up to ridicule or harassment takes courage, particularly when it concerns a divisive or inflammatory issue. But invective is not limited to topics that are obviously about race. In the current climate, every subject — even hard science — is politicized. Those who come down on one side or the other are subject to attack and harassment by those who disagree.

The Imposter Syndrome.

Regardless of their CVs, many people of color, especially women, don't see themselves as qualified to offer an expert opinion or insight. During a panel at the 2019 International Journalism Festival, Amplifying Women's Authoritative Voice in Media, Laura Zalenko, senior executive editor of Bloomberg Editorial, said that one obstacle to remedying the underrepresentation of women was women themselves who said they didn't feel prepared or comfortable doing that.

Overcoming the Barriers

School your source.

Whether they are real people sharing their experiences or subject matter experts, few people who don't work in media know what to expect when they agree to be interviewed. For example, they don't know that an hour-long interview might produce one quote or be cut out of the story altogether. Part of our job as journalists is to explain the process so that when the assignment is over, the source doesn't feel misled or disappointed in the end result.

Practice cultural competence.

There is a need for a better understanding about communities and cultures other than our own, also known as cultural competence. This isn't just for white journalists. Understanding that different communities have different histories and experiences with the press should be the starting point for every journalist.

Many newsrooms have begun to help the staff develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills

necessary to actually listen, engage and build empathy for someone else's experiences. This happens with training, outreach activities and a commitment is made to turn a temporary project into institutional change.

Lay the groundwork first.

If possible, try to recruit new sources before you actually need them in a story to avoid making a cold approach when you're on deadline. "I found that if it's someone I know tangentially perhaps through a mutual acquaintance, there's a bit more confidence in the care they'll receive," says Brown.

Explain the process.

Whether they are real people sharing their experiences or subject matter experts, few non-media people know what to expect when they agree to be interviewed. Journalists should be ready to explain the processes and set expectations so that when the assignment is over, the source doesn't feel misled and might be willing to be interviewed again.