

# [Now upon difficult issues. writers should pay](https://assignbuster.com/now-upon-difficult-issues-writers-should-pay/)

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Now more thanever, we are at a critical juncture in the evolution of the news media.

Thirtyyears ago, no one could have predicted how drastic a change a technology likethe Internet would produce. The prevalence of the digital has not onlyengendered a revolution in the news media’s business models, but also an upheavalof the techniques of journalism and reporting. Younger generations are fastemerging as large consumers of news, and the newsrooms that will serve theirneeds will not look the same as they do today.

They will be more modern, moreinclusive, and more collaborative. One of the biggest focuses in building abetter newsroom should be the coverage of controversial social topics: race andracial relations, gender identity and sexuality, and sexual harassment andassault. These present many challenges for journalists, who must learn to beself-aware during the reporting process for stories touching upon difficultissues.

Writers should pay particular attention to their linguisticconstruction, focus on big picture trends, and remain aggressive and fair whencovering these topics. Creating a balanced, conscious, and effective newsroomwill require honest conservation, collaboration, and mutual encouragement.            Thefirst step in understanding how to build a better newsroom is to focus on thecurrent state of the news media. As has become clear since the 2016 election, there are clear ideological bubbles in the United States and a perceivedliberal bias in mainstream news sources. According to the Pew Research Center(2017), the circulation of daily newspapers has been declining since the 90s, but the average monthly unique visitors to newspaper websites has increasedsince 2014. Readers have a short attention span, spending on average between 2and 3 minutes per visit on newspaper websites.

With 93 percent of adults evergetting their news online, it is not surprising that the percentage ofnewspaper advertising revenue coming from digital is on the rise. The Internethas made it much easier for people with differing opinions to filter their newsin a way that validates rather than challenges their viewpoints. This has ledto a growing polarization at opposite viewpoint poles (Pew Research Center, 2017). Right-leaning audiences remain skeptical of mainstream news, with only20 percent of conservatives trusting the news compared with 51 percent ofleft-leaning Americans (Edkins, 2017). If we focus even closer along politicallines, it appears Republicans have a much more negative view of the nationalnews media, at 85 percent, than Democrats, who are more equally divided (PewResearch Center, 2017). Another important aspect of consistent conservatives’news diet is that it is centered on one main source: Fox News.

The Pew ResearchCenter (2014) found that this group distrusted more than trusted 24 out of 36selected news sources, while consistent liberals – who consumed a range of newssources – trusted more than distrusted 28 of the 36. This information paints alandscape of political division and differing news consumption. It is withinthis context that certain social issues become controversial, as many do notagree on how they should be covered, if at all.             Storiesabout racial tensions, gender identity and sexuality, and sexual assault andharassment have been more present in mainstream media and the public discoursein recent years. These topics have been the subject of heated debate, controversy, and protest. Léa Rébeillé-Borgella, a 21-year-old student, believes these issues are not going to get easier and journalists have to findways to cover them: “ By nature, they’re always going to be subject to a lot ofcontroversy among the public discourse, but it’s not a reason to not cover thembecause the public needs to be informed of the realities of the issues and towhat extent they are prevalent,” she said.

It is no surprise that some of themost debated and talked about stories of the last two year have fallen into oneof these categories, including police officer-involved shootings, gay marriage, and the #MeToo movement. When properly covered, these subjects can drawnational attention and strong reactions from both older and youngergenerations. In fact, as the news media’s audience evolves, so do itspriorities and what it wants to read about.

This is an essential concept totake into account when designing the modern newsroom.             America’schanging population denotes changing morals and changing values. In 2016, theU.

S. population was 61. 3 percent white and 38. 7 percent non-white, with 13. 2percent born in a foreign country and 21. 1 percent of people over 5 years oldspeaking a language other than English at home (United States Census Bureau, 2017). America’s image of a melting pot is only growing in strength as itspopulation becomes more and more diverse. We are also seeing an evolution inthe generational makeup of the U.

S. According to Fry (2016), the Millennialgeneration has now overtaken the Baby Boomer generation as the U. S.

‘ s largestliving group. Millennials, which include those born between 1980 and 2000 or1995 depending on the definition, are more ethnically diverse than previousgenerations (Pew Research Center, 2015). Millennials are politically dividedfrom older generations and, along with Generation X, identify as the mostDemocratic generation (Maniam & Smith, 2017). On the other hand, oldergenerations have a higher prevalence of conservative Republicans. Millennials’ tastesand preferences have often been talked about – especially in the context ofvery specific industries such as the diamond industry or avocado toast business– but deeper information tells us a lot more about who they are as a generationand what they value. They are more likely than older generations to seenational identity more inclusively (Stokes, 2017), have driven the push towardpublic support for marijuana and its legalization (Geiger, 2016), are lessreligious than older Americans (Masci, 2016), and spend almost eight hours aday online (Laporte, 2015).

Millennials’ view of the national news media ismore positive than previous generations, but it has become more negative in thelast five years (Fingerhut, 2016). Another newer generation – Generation Z –has also appeared in some demographic data and includes those born from 1995onwards. They are the first truly digital native generation, are ambitious, andlose interest quickly (Williams, 2015). They also cite YouTube as a reliablesource of information (The Center of Generational Kinetics, 2017). MattCarroll, a Northeastern University professor and former Boston Globe Spotlightreporter, suggested that the world is changing rapidly and the way peopleconsume news will soon set reading patterns. “ You are way more connected todigital than I am. The person who is born today will be way more connected todigital than you are,” he said. Even with a low level of trust in the news, there are some encouraging figures when it comes to younger generations’consumption of news.

According to the American Press Institute (2015), 85percent indicate that keeping up with the news is at least somewhat importantfor them, with 69 percent getting news daily and 40 percent paying for one ormore new services, apps, or digital subscriptions. Another interesting point isthat social media has helped in exposing younger generations to more news on adaily basis. With news being more accessible than ever, and Millennials and GenZ taking an interest in social issues, how can we build newsrooms that respondto their needs?             Siftingthrough tons of information every day, viewers want to read things that grabtheir attention. This does not mean we should use click bait, but rather frameimportant stories in such a way that the audience wants to learn more about thetopic. One key way of accomplishing this, especially when sharing stories onsocial media, is through personal experiences and human interest takes onglobal issues. For example, interviewing a refugee and tracing their journeymakes it much more real and relatable to younger generations than simplystating how many have lost their lives on the way.

Capitalizing on these sortsof stories to draw the reader in and toward other stories will drive audienceengagement and spark discussion and emotional reactions. Rébeillé-Borgella addsthat a combination of text and visual elements will be the best way toaccomplish this: “ You need to have the body, the content that explains it. Andmaybe, because everything is visualized now all the time, adding an explanatoryvideo or something like that would help.

But that shouldn’t be the only thing”, she said. Candice Rebot, a 21-year-old student and one of the creators of theNEUtoo campaign at Northeastern University, agrees with this, adding thatsources’ voices are also key to engaging the reader. “ Visuals are definitelyimportant, whether it’s a video of someone telling their story, or anything visualwill help. It’s always good to put a face to the person speaking.

Quotes arealso important and keep some of the emotion in the article,” she said. In thesame way that stories can engage the audience, so can journalists. AsProPublica has done so effectively, taking into account readers, their stories, and their opinions can be very beneficial to the development of stories andsources. Crowdsourcing ideas and sources in this way can help with theattainment of another goal: viewpoint diversity. Carroll believes everynewsroom should be reflecting different viewpoints, backgrounds, or ethnicgroups depending on the story. “ If it’s a good newsroom with good reporters andgood editors, they are always on the lookout for diverse viewpoints and they arepushing themselves to make sure they are talking to diverse groups of people,” he said. Beyond having diverse sources, efforts can also be made to improvediversity inside of newsrooms, although Rébeillé-Borgella does not believe thisis the end-all-be-all solution.

She said one can understand an issue but not tothe fullest extent if one hasn’t lived it. On the other hand, theprofessionalism of a journalist can mitigate this separation. “ It’s notnecessarily because you are a part of that group that you will relay theinformation better.

It’s always a matter of balance. I think to a certainextent, having people who are more diverse would help to have a more eclecticview, but then it’s also about being a good journalist,” she said. Carrolladded that newsrooms are still unfortunately struggling to hire people ofcolor. That is one area that the modern newsroom will have to focus on, especially when it comes to covering controversial topics such as race andracial tensions.             Whencovering race, it is essential to think about the big picture and go beyond theindividual incidents and instances.

According to Schaffer (2003), ways to dothis include finding sources that can speak to more than just their personalexperience, thinking in terms of “ truths” rather than “ the truth,” andlistening for patterns. Reporting on race is often less about intense conflictand more about a winding journey. In a modern newsroom, reporters should gobeyond the reports of African American men being shot by police and look at theunderlying trends. Journalists also need to make the effort of using the rightlanguage and keeping up with proper denominations. Being precise in thelanguage used, by using a style guide like the Diversity Style Guide by theCenter for Integration and Improvement of Journalism at San Francisco StateUniversity (2017) for example, can easily increase accuracy in reporting. However, as Fitzgerald (2017) warns, being careful about language use does notmean shying away from harsh and touchy words like “ white supremacy” when they arefact. He also recommends moving away from highly visible racism and placingquestions of resources, power, and access at the heart of stories instead. Themodern newsroom needs to be more self-reflective than it has been in the pastand make an effort of real transparency.

Newsrooms have to be open about theirown diversity in order to be honest with their readers. As Ho (2017) pointsout, some of the biggest newsrooms have still not increased the employment ofpeople of color in masthead roles. It is important to represent the communitiesone is reporting on. The same can be said for other minority communities, suchas the LGBTQ+ community.            Inearly 2017, the Associated Press finally changed its style guide to include” they” as a singular pronoun, after years of debate and several newsroomsmaking the shift independently (Hare, 2017). At Boston. com, a subsidiary ofBoston Globe Media, it was the policy of the reporters and editors since 2015 touse the singular “ they” when covering stories related to gender identity.

Carrollsaid that newsrooms were definitely behind the times on gender identity andsexuality. But, he added, someone from a traditional background living in thesuburbs may not comprehend these language shifts – that is where journalistscome in, as educators and informers. News organizations can rely on outsideassociations to help them help others become informed.

A good example of thisis GLAAD’s extensive reference guide to covering gender identity and sexuality, available on their website. As Grimaldi (2016) pointed out, reporters have tokeep up with the evolving standards and, without the lived experiences, have towork extra hard to “ get it right.” Journalists should not only think of howthey write but how they ask questions too. They could also consider confirmingall their sources’ preferred gender pronouns. Perhaps the most importanttechnique to use it to involve other journalists in the conversation and talkto sources about what to include regarding their LGBTQ status. The EthicalJournalism Initiative’s “ Guidelines on LGBT reporting” goes one step further, suggesting reporters ask themselves whether labels are even important to thestory they are telling.

If they are, writers should be aware of the terminologythat is appropriate, as mentioned previously, and ask for advice or look atguides from organizations. For example, in the process of reporting for mycurrent project focusing on transgender inmates in Massachusetts, I reached outto Black and Pink, an LGBTQ inmate pen-pal project, not only for help withsources but also to understand the best way to reach out to inmates in thissituation, how to approach a discussion of their status as trans withoutputting them in danger, and how to formulate certain questions about theiroperative status and medical care. Without the knowledge of the director ofthis initiative, certain inmates might have received letters that wereoffensive to them and/or put them at risk for violence. In this case and manyothers, stigma is still very high in certain communities and using the rightwords can be a matter of life or death.             Ourthird controversial topic, sexual assault and harassment, has been on the frontpage of most newspapers since the NewYork Times first broke the Harvey Weinstein story. A huge social movementhas swept the nation, with many women coming forward with their own stories ofharassment and assault.

Carroll thinks this reflects broader changes insociety: “ Women’s roles have gone from second-class citizens to running majorcorporations. There is a much greater willingness of people not being afraid ofspeaking up when bad stuff happens,” he said. With more of these stories comingup, it is difficult to choose what to report on. Blanding (2017) advisesreporters to consider stories that go beyond the criminal justice system andfocus on recovery and healing.

In terms of the reporting, earning the trust ofa victim is essential, but it should not be done at the expense of journalisticsensibilities: reporters have to balance the verification of facts with theempathy they feel for someone talking about a traumatic experience. One way toensure fairness on both ends is to set ground rules for interaction early on. The editing process should be one that is transparent and includes people fromdifferent backgrounds. Rebot pointed out that reporters have to be careful innot becoming the ones harassing the survivor. “ When we did the NEUtoo campaign, we realized we went a bit too far in some instances and made the survivorsbecome the victims again and they started reliving the moment. So make sure youkeep a distance between what happened and what you are trying to say,” shesaid.

She also recommended focusing on positive words, such as using “ survivor” rather than “ victim” to empower sources. The choice of words is once againessential to the proper coverage of this topic. Hiltner (2017) recommends usingdescriptive but not euphemistic wording and staying fair, especially with thepotential of legal issues arising. The choice of words must be justifiable andjournalists should welcome comments from readers and engage in conversation. Ina November blog post, Daniszewski (2017) called for journalists to use the word” misconduct” rather than “ harassment,” arguing that it is more encompassing anddoes not diminish the alleged acts, while also avoiding the legal pitfalls thatsexual harassment, which has a specific meaning, brings.

The behaviors beingalleged or admitted should be described as specifically as possible. Glover(2017) said that in reporting on this difficult topic, writers should stay awayfrom the words “ scandal,” “ sex,” “ claimed,” “ proclaimed,” “ reportedly,” and” shenanigans.” Most of the stories we have seen so far in the public discoursehave revolved around public officials and figures. Rebot thinks reportersshould not focus on celebrities as much because the public cannot relate tothem: “ I feel like because it’s famous people, we tend not to focus on it andpeople don’t seem to realize how often these horrible things happen in theworkplace, at school.” she said.

Journalists need to translate this socialmovement and intense focus on sexual harassment and assault into local coverageof the issues and the action being taken. Carroll believes this is alreadyhappening: “ It doesn’t generate many headlines but there is an effort to focuson regular people’s stories. It has trickled down very, very quickly into otherorganizations,” he said.            Becauseof their controversial and taboo nature, these three topics are quite difficultto cover – both for sources and for reporters. They involve a lot ofself-awareness and consciousness. To cover them effectively in a newsroom thatcaters to Millennials and Generation Z, who want to read about these stories, reporters should establish procedures and routines that focus on three keyconcepts: collaboration, encouraging openness and discussion, and supportingminority colleagues and women. The revolution in office design has made collaborationeasy to accomplish.

Open floor plans and the removal of cubicles in mostorganizations means going around to speak to a colleague or shouting out aquestion in the general direction of the newsroom are easy and commonplace. AtBoston. com and within the Boston Globe newsroom, this was an hourly occurrence. People ask how to spell certain things, what the right word is to use in aspecific situation, or for another editing eye. Collaboration is essential toavoid mistakes, slip-ups, and mishaps – especially when covering one of ourthree controversial topics. Journalists should not simply ask the most obviousperson about the story they are writing.

Instead, they should think about whohas written about the topic before or has experience reporting on it, as wellas who has personally experienced it. From collaboration will naturally flowopenness and discussion. Sharing feedback, thoughts, and opinions on a specificsubject, how a story is developing, or someone’s choice of words can be very helpfuland educational. This flow of ideas and information should also translate toaudience engagement: reporters need to communicate with readers via socialmedia and structured call-outs so they can better answer their needs and tellthem the stories they need to know.

The last aspect, supporting minoritycolleagues and women, also emerges organically from our previous point. Creating a supportive, collaborative, and open newsroom will ultimately resultin the success of all who work in the newsroom. That success will undoubtedlylead to better storytelling, better reporting, and better visualizing.