

# Now upon difficult issues. writers should pay

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

Thirty years ago, no one could have predicted how drastic a change a technology like the Internet would produce. The prevalence of the digital has not only engendered a revolution in the news media's business models, but also an upheaval of the techniques of journalism and reporting. Younger generations are fast emerging as large consumers of news, and the newsrooms that will serve their needs will not look the same as they do today.

They will be more modern, more inclusive, and more collaborative. One of the biggest focuses in building a better newsroom should be the coverage of controversial social topics: race and racial relations, gender identity and sexuality, and sexual harassment and assault. These present many challenges for journalists, who must learn to be self-aware during the reporting process for stories touching upon difficult issues.

Writers should pay particular attention to their linguistic construction, focus on big picture trends, and remain aggressive and fair when covering these topics. Creating a balanced, conscious, and effective newsroom will require honest conversation, collaboration, and mutual encouragement.

The first step in understanding how to build a better newsroom is to focus on the current state of the news media. As has become clear since the 2016 election, there are clear ideological bubbles in the United States and a perceived liberal 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 increased since 2014. Readers have a short attention span, spending on average between 2 and 3 minutes per visit on newspaper websites.

With 93 percent of adults ever getting their news online, it is not surprising that the percentage of newspaper advertising revenue coming from digital is on the rise. The Internet has made it much easier for people with differing opinions to filter their news in a way that validates rather than challenges their viewpoints. This has led to a growing polarization at opposite viewpoint poles (Pew Research Center, 2017). Right-leaning audiences remain skeptical of mainstream news, with only 20 percent of conservatives trusting the news compared with 51 percent of left-leaning Americans (Edkins, 2017). If we focus even closer along political lines, it appears Republicans have a much more negative view of the national news media, at 85 percent, than Democrats, who are more equally divided (Pew Research Center, 2017). Another important aspect of consistent conservatives' news diet is that it is centered on one main source: Fox News.

The Pew Research Center (2014) found that this group distrusted more than trusted 24 out of 36 selected news sources, while consistent liberals – who consumed a range of news sources – trusted more than distrusted 28 of the 36. This information paints a landscape of political division and differing news consumption. It is within this context that certain social issues become controversial, as many do not agree on how they should be covered, if at all. Stories about racial tensions, gender identity and sexuality, and sexual

assault and harassment have been more present in mainstream media and the public discourse in 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 find ways to cover them: “ By nature, they’re always going to be subject to a lot of controversy among the public discourse, but it’s not a reason to not cover them because the public needs to be informed of the realities of the issues and to what extent they are prevalent,” she said.

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

This is an essential concept to take into account when designing the modern newsroom. America’s changing population denotes changing morals and changing values. In 2016, the U.

S. population was 61.3 percent white and 38.7 percent non-white, with 13.2 percent born in a foreign country and 21.1 percent of people over 5 years old speaking 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 its population becomes more and more diverse. We are also seeing an evolution in the generational makeup of the U.

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

's largest living group. Millennials, which include those born between 1980 and 2000 or 1995 depending on the definition, are more ethnically diverse than previous generations (Pew Research Center, 2015). Millennials are politically divided from older generations and, along with Generation X, identify as the most Democratic generation (Maniam & Smith, 2017). On the other hand, older generations have a higher prevalence of conservative Republicans. Millennials' tastes and preferences have often been talked about – especially in the context of very 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 generation and what they value. They are more likely than older generations to see national identity more inclusively (Stokes, 2017), have driven the push toward public support for marijuana and its legalization (Geiger, 2016), are less religious than older Americans (Masci, 2016), and spend almost eight hours a day online (Laporte, 2015).

Millennials' view of the national news media is more positive than previous generations, but it has become more negative in the last five years (Fingerhut, 2016). Another newer generation – Generation Z – has also appeared in some demographic data and includes those born from 1995 onwards. They are the first truly digital native generation, are ambitious, and lose interest quickly (Williams, 2015). They also cite YouTube as a reliable source of information (The Center of Generational Kinetics, 2017). Matt Carroll, a Northeastern University professor and former Boston

Globe Spotlight reporter, suggested that the world is changing rapidly and the way people consume news will soon set reading patterns. “ You are way more connected to digital than I am. The person who is born today will be way more connected to digital 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), 85 percent indicate that keeping up with the news is at least somewhat important for them, with 69 percent getting news daily and 40 percent paying for one or more news services, apps, or digital subscriptions. Another interesting point is that social media has helped in exposing younger generations to more news on a daily basis. With news being more accessible than ever, and Millennials and Gen Z taking an interest in social issues, how can we build newsrooms that respond to their needs? Sifting through tons of information every day, viewers want to read things that grab their attention. This does not mean we should use click bait, but rather frame important stories in such a way that the audience wants to learn more about the topic. One key way of accomplishing this, especially when sharing stories on social media, is through personal experiences and human interest takes on global issues. For example, interviewing a refugee and tracing their journey makes it much more real and relatable to younger generations than simply stating how many have lost their lives on the way.

Capitalizing on these sorts of stories to draw the reader in and toward other stories will drive audience engagement and spark discussion and emotional

reactions. Rébeillé-Borgella adds that a combination of text and visual elements will be the best way to accomplish this: “ You need to have the body, the content that explains it. And maybe, because everything is visualized now all the time, adding an explanatory video 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 the NEUtoo campaign at Northeastern University, agrees with this, adding that sources’ voices are also key to engaging the reader. “ Visuals are definitely important, whether it’s a video of someone telling their story, or anything visual will help. It’s always good to put a face to the person speaking.

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

She said one can understand an issue but not to the fullest extent if one hasn't lived it. On the other hand, the professionalism of a journalist can mitigate this separation. "It's not necessarily because you are a part of that group that you will relay the information better.

It's always a matter of balance. I think to a certain extent, having people who are more diverse would help to have a more eclectic view, but then it's also about being a good journalist," she said. Carroll added that newsrooms are still unfortunately struggling to hire people of color. That is one area that the modern newsroom will have to focus on, especially when it comes to covering controversial topics such as race and racial tensions.

When covering race, it is essential to think about the big picture and go beyond the individual incidents and instances.

According to Schaffer (2003), ways to do this include finding sources that can speak to more than just their personal experience, thinking in terms of "truths" rather than "the truth," and listening for patterns. Reporting on race is often less about intense conflict and more about a winding journey. In a modern newsroom, reporters should go beyond the reports of African American men being shot by police and look at the underlying trends. Journalists also need to make the effort of using the right language and keeping up with proper denominations. Being precise in the language used, by using a style guide like the Diversity Style Guide by the Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism at San Francisco State University (2017) for example, can easily increase accuracy in reporting. However, as Fitzgerald (2017) warns, being careful about language use does not mean



shying away from harsh and touchy words like “white supremacy” when they are fact. He also recommends moving away from highly visible racism and placing questions of resources, power, and access at the heart of stories instead. The modern newsroom needs to be more self-reflective than it has been in the past and make an effort of real transparency.

Newsrooms have to be open about their own diversity in order to be honest with their readers. As Ho (2017) points out, some of the biggest newsrooms have still not increased the employment of people of color in masthead roles. It is important to represent the communities one is reporting on. The same can be said for other minority communities, such as the LGBTQ+

community. In early 2017, the Associated Press finally changed its style guide to include “they” as a singular pronoun, after years of debate and several newsrooms making the shift independently (Hare, 2017). At Boston.com, a subsidiary of Boston Globe Media, it was the policy of the reporters and editors since 2015 to use the singular “they” when covering stories related to gender identity.

Carroll said that newsrooms were definitely behind the times on gender identity and sexuality. But, he added, someone from a traditional background living in the suburbs may not comprehend these language shifts – that is where journalists come in, as educators and informers. News organizations can rely on outside associations to help them help others become informed.

A good example of this is GLAAD’s extensive reference guide to covering gender identity and sexuality, available on their website. As Grimaldi (2016) pointed out, reporters have to keep up with the evolving standards and,

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without the lived experiences, have to work extra hard to “ get it right.” Journalists should not only think of how they write but how they ask questions too. They could also consider confirming all their sources’ preferred gender pronouns. Perhaps the most important technique to use it to involve other journalists in the conversation and talk to sources about what to include regarding their LGBTQ status. The Ethical Journalism Initiative’s “ Guidelines on LGBT reporting” goes one step further, suggesting reporters ask themselves whether labels are even important to the story they are telling.

If they are, writers should be aware of the terminology that is appropriate, as mentioned previously, and ask for advice or look at guides from organizations. For example, in the process of reporting for my current project focusing on transgender inmates in Massachusetts, I reached out to Black and Pink, an LGBTQ inmate pen-pal project, not only for help with sources but also to understand the best way to reach out to inmates in this situation, how to approach a discussion of their status as trans without putting them in danger, and how to formulate certain questions about their operative status and medical care. Without the knowledge of the director of this initiative, certain inmates might have received letters that were offensive to them and/or put them at risk for violence. In this case and many others, stigma is still very high in certain communities and using the right words can be a matter of life or death.

Our third controversial topic, sexual assault and harassment, has been on the front page of most newspapers since the New York Times first broke the Harvey Weinstein story. A huge social movement has swept the nation, with many women coming forward with their own stories of harassment and assault.

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

In terms of the reporting, earning the trust of a victim is essential, but it should not be done at the expense of journalistic sensibilities: reporters have to balance the verification of facts with the empathy they feel for someone talking about a traumatic experience. One way to ensure 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 from different backgrounds. Rebot pointed out that reporters have to be careful in not becoming the ones harassing the survivor. “ When we did the NEU too campaign, we realized we went a bit too far in some instances and made the survivors become the victims again and they started reliving the moment. So make sure you keep a distance between what happened and what you are trying to say,” she said.

She also recommended focusing on positive words, such as using “ survivor” rather than “ victim” to empower sources. The choice of words is once again essential to the proper coverage of this topic. Hiltner (2017) recommends using descriptive but not euphemistic wording and staying fair, especially with the potential of legal issues arising. The choice of words must

be justifiable and journalists should welcome comments from readers and engage in conversation. In a November blog post, Daniszewski (2017) called for journalists to use the word “misconduct” rather than “harassment,” arguing that it is more encompassing and does not diminish the alleged acts, while also avoiding the legal pitfalls that sexual harassment, which has a specific meaning, brings.

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

Journalists need to translate this social movement and intense focus on sexual harassment and assault into local coverage of the issues and the action being taken. Carroll believes this is already happening: “It doesn’t generate many headlines but there is an effort to focus on regular people’s stories. It has trickled down very, very quickly into other organizations,” he said. Because of their controversial and taboo nature, these three topics are quite difficult to cover – both for sources and for reporters. They involve a lot of self-awareness and consciousness. To cover them effectively in a newsroom that caters to Millennials and Generation Z, who want to read

about these stories, reporters should establish procedures and routines that focus on three key concepts: collaboration, encouraging openness and discussion, and supporting minority colleagues and women. The revolution in office design has made collaboration easy to accomplish.

Open floor plans and the removal of cubicles in most organizations means going around to speak to a colleague or shouting out a question in the general direction of the newsroom are easy and commonplace. At Boston.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 a specific situation, or for another editing eye. Collaboration is essential to avoid mistakes, slip-ups, and mishaps – especially when covering one of our three controversial topics. Journalists should not simply ask the most obvious person about the story they are writing.

Instead, they should think about who has written about the topic before or has experience reporting on it, as well as who has personally experienced it. From collaboration will naturally flow openness and discussion. Sharing feedback, thoughts, and opinions on a specific subject, how a story is developing, or someone's choice of words can be very helpful and educational. This flow of ideas and information should also translate to audience engagement: reporters need to communicate with readers via social media and structured call-outs so they can better answer their needs and tell them the stories they need to know.

The last aspect, supporting minority colleagues and women, also emerges organically from our previous point. Creating a supportive, collaborative, and

open newsroom will ultimately result in the success of all who work in the newsroom. That success will undoubtedly lead to better storytelling, better reporting, and better visualizing.