

Best practices in reporting: addressing racism and systemic racism

Pipeline protests. Black Lives Matter. Police involvement in Indigenous deaths. 1492 Land Back Lane. Sipekne'katik lobster fishery. Ongoing inequality exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. All these events raised important societal questions.

In journalism, some of those questions needing careful reflection are: how to include more diverse voices in reporting, the use of proper language and how to incorporate important historical context and nuance into news stories.

The NNC has gathered and highlighted best practices and tips for newsrooms and journalists reporting from or on the widely acknowledged systemic racism in our society. You will find them attached to this note.

To develop these best practices, we consulted with journalists, editors, academics and individuals about the needs, demands, and practice of reporting on Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) communities and issues. The intention is to provide guidance for newsrooms, education for the public, and a framework against which the NNC can assess complaints about reporting that involves allegation(s) of racism.

Repeatedly, we heard that instead of needing new journalism practices, what's needed is for journalists and editors to apply deliberate rigour in using good basic journalism skills when reporting on racism, systemic racism, BIPOC issues or diverse communities. We also heard pleas for more inclusive journalism that includes diverse voices in everyday news or as experts, and presents Black, Indigenous and otherwise 'other' communities in a wider range of stories and perspectives.

The bottom line on advice? Keep striving for accuracy, context, appropriate framing, good sources and opportunity to respond to harmful statements and allegations. But also take a step back from the usual perspective or the 'normal' viewpoint to ask who, what, why, where, when and how from a deeper level and purpose: Who are the different voices I can include? What is the bigger context? Where can I find out more about this community or issue? How do historic events or systems influence the current situation?

The best practices and tips offered here are intended to support you as a journalist or newsroom do the important work of reporting on our diverse communities. We hope these guidelines are helpful and we look forward to hearing your feedback.

Journalistic best practices in addressing systemic racism

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Current principles and widely suggested guidance:

- ❖ Reporting should reflect the ethnic diversity of Canada in a natural way, free of explicit or unconscious racism.
- ❖ Identify a person by ethnicity, immigration status, colour, or religion only when it is pertinent to the story, and without resorting to stereotypes. When it is pertinent to the story, ask individuals how they want to be identified and use those terms or words.
- ❖ Do thorough fact-checking before being published. Enlist expertise from BIPOC communities if needed.
- ❖ Take care with the language of ‘objectivity’ and ‘expertise’ so as not to reinforce the status quo or characterize ‘sides’ in a conflict or protest.
- ❖ Avoid false balance equivalencies. Be aware of inequities and ill-informed narratives; include historic facts or events that may have bearing on current events.
- ❖ Avoid episodic framing of events. Look deeper into issues or power imbalances.
- ❖ Fair reporting means consulting with BIPOC communities and experts as sources for historical context and perspective. Use diverse sources to inform about the issues at hand and answer the question: ‘why?’

TIPS to help put the guidelines into action : These tips are offered in consultation with diverse editors, journalists, and academics as guidance to support success in using the best practices.

Language: “Must do’s”

Take care not to confuse a people with an ideology, state or religion. Do not conflate individuals or groups as a whole with extremists.

Avoid typical story structure that puts police or other authority voices at the top and in control of the narrative while reducing community or BIPOC voices to ‘colour’ and reaction.

Be accurate, but also be sensitive to the impact on the community of certain language choices.

Be willing to accept that language evolves, to learn why, and to adopt the changes.

Remember that you are not ‘giving people a voice’ but amplifying the voice people have.

Avoiding pitfalls: “Go the extra step”

Be aware that stories don’t begin to exist when the media shows up.

Use BIPOC sources and include their focus or perspective on the story arc. Tracking your use of sources, for example, can ensure or remind of the need for diversity.

Look for credible, community supported sources who will bring you up to speed.

Dig into the deeper ‘why’ and ‘how’.

Step back and slow down. Take time to know a community, which will improve the accuracy and context of your reporting.

Attitude and outlook: “Challenge your status quo”

Be sensitive to language, your audience, and change. Tell your story well, accurately, and faithfully, even if there is pushback.

Be flexible and alert to changes in language or standards. What’s right now may not be right in a few months.

Reporting or opinion writing may take the role of ally in reconciliation or in gender issues. Some readers may object, but opportunity for advocacy journalism is a legitimate journalistic activity.

Journalists are informed by experience, interviewing, finding and checking facts. Admit what you don’t know about another culture or community, be respectful and accommodating as an interviewer and precise with language.

When mistakes are made, own it, learn from it and grow. Some communities will be reluctant to allow the news media to tell their story. Be patient and willing to tell those stories in the best way possible when the opportunities arise.

Tips we heard for journalists:

Rethink objectivity, how you rely on experts, and whether your story has false balance or ‘both-sides-ism’ that gives weight to racist views.

Make sure that all reporting is accurate. Understand the history and context of Indigenous stories.

Use existing journalistic standards but add rigor when reporting on unfamiliar communities.

Tips we heard for editors:

Recognize that BIPOC stories are valuable, newsworthy, and worth pursuing.

Give the right people the opportunity to contribute story ideas and voices.

Be open. Step out of the box and have conversations about what you’re missing, about changing language, representation, stereotyping, and about unconscious bias or knowledge gaps.

Observations and experiences we heard in our research and interviews that may help journalists and editors in reporting on racism, systemic racism, or protests - and open news coverage to a more diverse version of the community.

The bottom line: Existing journalistic standards apply to reporting on racism, BIPOC issues and protest, but journalists need to bring added rigour to their reporting on unfamiliar communities or cultures.

Language and Accuracy

- “Language gives a version of truth and facts. But it can be a blunt and imprecise. Be willing to accept that language evolves and learn when it does.”

- “We call folks what they want to be called.” Get behind movements that give dignity to marginalized persons or groups.
- “Be sensitive to language, to your audience, to change, and to telling a story well, accurately, and faithfully, knowing there’s going to be pushback.”
- There is both importance and difficulty in changing language, but accuracy can create cohesion.
- Language is especially important in stories involving police. It can label or diminish a person - or allow police sources to control the narrative to their own advantage.
- Tell stories fully, and with precision.
- Be accurate but also be sensitive to the impact on the community of certain language choices.

Balance

- False balance is a hard concept for editors to be able to perceive and to stop.
- Know the issues and sensitivities facing your readers.
- Have the conversations about what you’re missing, about changing language; about representation; about stereotyping.
- Make effort to involve marginalized communities, and to create ongoing connections.
- Tell the stories even where you know there will be pushback or upset from readers.
- Editors and publishers need to recognize that BIPOC stories are valuable, newsworthy, and worth pursuing.
- Put a high priority on reconciliation.
- The media plays a huge role in bridging misinformation gaps and tensions between settler Canada and Indigenous communities.
- BIPOC people must be regularly included in all coverage. People from different communities have different life experiences, and journalists should aim to get a diversity of perspectives on issues to inform the public debate.
- Avoid “both-sides-ism” or false equivalence in stories which risks giving weight to racist or colonial perspectives compared to anti-racist perspectives.
- Encourage conversations in the newsroom that would help people question their own perspectives and foster reflection on unconscious biases or knowledge gaps, especially among individuals in positions of power.

Framing

- Understand that communities are not monoliths and may have tensions or discord. Develop experts or sources who can explain nuance or guide you.
- Do you have all the facts? Will including or excluding facts reinforce stereotypes or divides? Avoid entrenched language, “normal” point of view or narrative, or reinforcing stereotypes.
- Involve experts, consider the narrative and ramifications of using one point of view or another.
- Consider your policy on court reporting, and ‘timing out’ online reports of minor court matters, which disproportionately affect BIPOC individuals and communities.
- Resist advancing the police view as the “right” view, with community voices at the bottom as reaction or colour.
- Remember that a member of a minority community has a broader identity as well. Don’t omit other aspects of the individual.

- Longstanding historical issues are at play. Stories just don't begin to exist when the mainstream media shows up.
- Answering the 'why' is crucial to providing necessary larger context
- Be aware of oversimplifying the story frame when reporting on Indigenous people and issues, and include voices that understand any overlapping issues to describe the matter at hand.
- Be willing for newsroom challenges. Get out of the comfort zone of the beat. Unpack the issues and be prepared to handle the pushback.
- Have ongoing flexibility. What's right now may not be right in a few months.

History and context

- Reporting should look for and reflect awareness of communities that preceded or coincide.
- Context needs to be in the main news story, because readers may not see the follow up story.
- Including and being aware of historical context is essential when reporting on Indigenous issues. This might mean doing 'more homework.'
- Be prepared for pushback against being reminded of a negative past or uncomfortable facts. The same discomforts arise in relation to other topics as well, but the matter is relevant.
- It's ok to be an ally in efforts for Indigenous reconciliation or gender issues. Some will object, but Canada has a long, noble tradition of advocacy journalism.
- Give the right people the opportunity to contribute and help readers understand the history and context of an issue.
- When talking about reporting on and in marginalized communities, it's essential to recognize that you're not 'giving people a voice,' but instead amplifying their voices.
- Put context in the reporting. Use a fact box about treaty history, for example, like the "help" fact boxes attached to stories about mental health or suicide.

Commenting

- Management of commenting can reduce the volume of racism, combat stereotyping, and amplify positive role models.
- Consider disallowing comment on stories about sex assault, porn, or crimes against children.
- Allow a 72 hour window to post comments, then close as a way to avoid off-topic trolling.
- Amplify Indigenous spokespersons who stand up and speak to issues in comments, by monitoring comments and shutting down and deleting hateful and ugly comments.
- Remove commenting on stories related to Indigenous issues if moderating against insensitive and sometimes hateful postings isn't possible.
- Disqualify any letter to the editor that promotes hateful disinformation.

Sources

- Build sustaining, meaningful relationships with sources in order to bring BIPOC stories forward.
- Consult members of BIPOC communities and experts. Use the Band's media liaison person.
- Track your sources and review occasionally to see what different voices you are incorporating.
- Get up to speed on issues but lower your expectations. Be patient.
- Readers want to hear the other side. Admit if for any reason you can't reach the other side.

- Using the same 'bubble' of experts leads to just one way of understanding. A First Nations doctor may include the impact of tuberculosis in Indigenous communities when discussing COVID, while a doctor practicing in Toronto may not mention of COVID experiences in rural settings.
- People with different life experience will bring different contexts. The tone of comments and examples cited in their story may reflect that.
- Past journalism errors affecting the Indigenous community mean a lingering reluctance toward the news media. Don't be frustrated but stay open and willing to tell those stories in the best way possible when the opportunities present themselves.
- Look for more writing and reporting opportunities for those from marginalized communities.
- Finding voices in minority communities takes work, which is hard to factor against deadlines, resources, and geography.