

Preventing culturally insensitive reporting

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The Problem

Lack of diversity in newsrooms leads to a lack of knowledge and unconscious biases that can cause journalists to engage in culturally insensitive reporting practices — even without realizing.

In 1979 the American Society of News Editors agreed to address the glaring issue of diversity in newsrooms and made a 21-year goal that, “by the year 2000, the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities in newsrooms would match that of the population at large,” (Arana, 2018).

When these problems bleed into news coverage it can isolate readers, misinform populations and harm communities in a variety of ways — on both macro and micro levels. Right now, the U.S. is still majority white (Jensen, 2022), but is on track to become minority white by 2045 (Frey, 2022). The newsrooms tasked with investigating, educating, and writing about these increasingly diverse populations and communities are still — as they long have been — majority white and male (Arana, 2018). In fact, the *Columbia Journalism Review* found that, “... racial and ethnic minorities comprise almost 40 percent of the US population, yet they make up less than 17 percent of newsroom staff at print and online publications, and only 13 percent of newspaper leadership.” On top of that, this is often still the case when newsrooms are in diverse cities, the same report found.

Newsroom diversity is not a new problem. It remains connected to other systemic sexism and racism, but remaining this way in a world that is increasingly diverse can cause major problems, even when journalists are doing their best to accurately cover events.

Mug shots & Overreporting on crimes committed by minorities

One major, recurring problem with media coverage — specifically related to Black and minority Americans and crime reporting — is the use of mugshots in crime reporting. In one case, an article from *Vox* (Desmond-Harris, 2015) examined media coverage by the same news outlet on the same day regarding a Black suspect who was arrested and a white suspect. The Black suspect's mugshot photos were used with the story coverage, while the white suspect's photos depicted him in a suit and tie. On top of that, a Media Matters study found that there is also an overreporting aspect of crime journalism that correlates to race (Angster, 2015). *Vox* cited the Media Matters study which examined New York Police Department arrest statistics compared to its local coverage of those crimes in 2015 and found that, "African Americans were suspects in 54 percent of murders, 55 percent of thefts, and 49 percent of assaults. But the suspects in the stations' coverage were black in 74 percent of murder stories, 84 percent of theft stories, and 73 percent of assault stories," (Desmond-Harris, 2015).

Though that particular study was done several years back, the problem is still pervasive and a lack of diversity in newsrooms leading to coverage like this can result in very dangerous and real issues. *The Marshall Project* reports that, since individuals from diverse and minority backgrounds are already more likely to be convicted of a crime, showing a mugshot or overreporting crime coverage of these populations reaffirms biases and "Publishing mugshots can disproportionately impact people of color by feeding into negative stereotypes and undermining the presumption of innocence," and doing so "creates this situation where you're criminalizing folks before they're convicted of any crime" (Blakinger, 2020).

Several newsrooms have created policies where they have stopped using mugshots (Gaynor, 2021) and are trying to reign in their coverage of crime reporting, but I believe truly addressing this issue must go beyond those two aspects. Acts of culturally insensitive reporting like the overuse of mug shots and over-reporting on crimes related to Black and Brown Americans can really perpetuate harm to these communities in ways reporters may not understand. When this occurs, the decision is often swift — they need an image and choose the mug shot to get the story out quickly, for example. However, as Media Matters found, this “overrepresentation of African-Americans as criminals ‘strengthens the cognitive association between Blacks and criminality in the mind’ of the audience.”

For that reason, I think the best way to address these issues perpetuated by newsrooms is to not only have clear image usage guidelines and culturally proper terminology standards, but to actively require reporters covering the communities being impacted by crimes to engage with those who are being impacted. If a reporter does not live in that community themselves, the publication has the responsibility to require them to understand the demographic makeup of the area, learn culturally appropriate terms to write about the population within that community, and regularly meet with members of the community to understand who they are and what issues they face. I also believe news outlets should make sure there is balanced coverage of these communities. For instance, if a news outlet writes a story about a crime that happened in a very poor neighborhood that is predominantly Black, the outlet should seek to also write coverage of that same community related to a positive happening or something that highlights the needs of that community. This helps to illustrate where struggles are and what the city may be overlooking that contributes to harms that impact the residents of that community. On top of that,

I believe news outlets should continue to hire fact-checkers, and also begin to hire bias-checkers. These would be individuals with diversity backgrounds and DE&I leadership focuses who read stories and examine photographs or video content before they are published to ensure any cultural insensitivity in a story — like using an improper term related to that community or an outdated reference that is rooted in harm — is removed. That way, if there is something the writer overlooks, someone else who has their ear to the ground regarding culturally appropriate language for various populations is also specifically checking for biases and outdated, harmful terminology before stories go live.

LGBTQIA news coverage

In addition to pervasive and dominating percentages of white males in newsroom staff and leadership, PewResearch found that newsrooms also majorly lack diversity related to sexual orientation — a whopping 54% of the 12,000 journalists interviewed for this research said either that they do not think there is enough sexual orientation diversity in their newsroom or that they are not sure if there is (Atske, 2022).

When there are no individuals on staff who are part of this community, sometimes coverage and language in stories can further discriminate and perpetuate harm to those communities as well.

The American Psychological Association's guide to avoiding heterosexual biases in language points out that a few major problems exist related to the LGBTQIA+ community and reporting: Terminology is typically vague, poorly defined, or rooted in discriminatory history (Anderson et al., 1991).

“Language may be ambiguous in reference, so that the reader is uncertain about its meaning or its inclusion and exclusion criteria; and the term homosexuality has been associated in the past with deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, and these negative stereotypes may be perpetuated by biased language,” the guide reads (Anderson et al., 1991).

When an outlet dead-names, misgenders, or uses inappropriate terminology to describe and report on news related to members of the LGBTQIA+ community, it reinforces harm as this population is already very likely to experience harassment on social media. *ABC News* found that 68% of LGBTQIA+ adults say they have been harassed on social media for their sexual orientation (Moscufo & Dobuski, 2022). While this is not directly correlated to news coverage, what is important to note here is that news outlets routinely use social media as a means to widely distribute coverage. If they publish a story that has language that further perpetuates harm in this way to LGBTQIA+ individuals, doing so arguably contributes to creating an oppressive environment for these individuals across both news and social media.

Specifically related to transgender individuals, if they are dead-named or misgendered by someone they know, a report found that this can “make trans people feel dysphoric - or even result in unsafe experiences, such as exposing them to anti-trans violence,” (Middleton & Roseberry, 2021). This is likely perpetuated if they are misgendered or dead-named in a story widely distributed by the media, I would think.

Lack of LGBTQIA+ individuals in newsrooms not only creates room for the harmful acts and biases listed above to occur in media coverage, but also leaves newsrooms without a perspective for what the readers who are part of these communities want to see covered.

To address this, I believe news organizations not only should ensure their journalists are intricately familiar with proper terminology regarding people's sexual orientation, but are also taught how to ask for pronouns from the subjects they interview for stories and are required to submit these pronouns and their proper name to their copy desk team, so there can be extra eyes ensuring someone is not referred to, for instance, as "she" when they identify as "he" or "they". In addition to this, news organizations should also be required to have a bias-checker, as previously mentioned, in order to help not only with the language and facts related to articles about minority communities, but also to help inform coverage strategies about important topics a newsroom may not be considering, but should cover related to minority communities.

Discussion

News moves fast and even educated, culturally sensitive and well-meaning journalists can slip up because of the time-crunch and pressure they are often put under. Journalists have, since the beginning of the profession, covered topics on communities they may not necessarily be part of. When doing this in the context of an industry that is historically white and male, that leads to many aspects that can be overlooked, steeped in bias, and harmful to communities outside of the white male intersection.

Both issues I've discussed here also have roots in journalists using harmful terminology or insensitive imagery – or both at times. Both issues are also still impacting communities who are not as frequently represented positively by media. Having trained bias-checkers and DE&I editors at news organizations can not only help prevent the possible usage of language that harms these communities, but can help inform ways to more positively cover important topics related to

them, thus creating balance and variety of coverage for minorities and LGBTQIA individuals across media.

The addition of positions like these should also be accompanied by news organizations' long-term diversity and inclusion strategies, which should encompass bias trainings, microaggression trainings and anonymous reporting for employees who experience internal discrimination as well, because addressing those issues internally as an organization will also help with outward coverage that avoids insensitive reporting.

Ultimately, aiming for a better understanding around linguistics related to the populations and communities journalists cover as well as strategies that ensure content coverage is bias-free before it goes live will not only benefit readers who the news serves, it will create a more dynamic and progressive environment for journalists to thrive and learn in throughout the news industry.

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