Breaking rules, forging trust: how to report on communities vulnerable to violence

By Te Shima Brennen

Contents

Introduction

In the summer of 2020 I witnessed the Black transgender community receiving a double dose of isolation from New York City. The first dose was due to the COVID-19 lockdown. The second came in the form of exclusion from the #BlackLivesMatter movement.[1]

As protests around Manhattan grew, many signs displayed the names of Black people killed by police that spring: George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. By contrast, the names of Tony McDade and Nina Pop – Black trans people killed in May of 2020 – were absent. [2,3]

People participate in a Black Trans Lives Matter rally in the Brooklyn borough in New York City, U.S., June 14, 2020. REUTERS/Stephanie Keith

During this time, many Black trans people, particularly Black trans women, not only raised alarms about their exclusion from the movement but organised their own marches to call for justice, equity, and equality for Black trans people.[4]

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[1] Allsop, J. (2022) The Movement for Black Trans lives, Columbia Journalism Review. Available at: https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/black-trans-lives-matter.php

[2] Thompson, L. (2020) The police killing you probably didn't hear about this week, Mother Jones. Available at: https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2020/05/tony-mcdade-tallahassee-florida-police-shooting-death/

[3] Ring, T. (2020) Trans woman Nina Pop stabbed to death in Missouri, ADVOCATE. Available at: https://www.advocate.com/crime/2020/5/06/trans-woman-nina-pop-stabbed-death-missouri

[4] Grullón Paz, I. and Astor, M. (2020) Black trans women seek more space in the movement, The New York Times. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/us/politics/black-trans-lives-matter.html

Even without a pandemic, queer and trans people of colour face [many challenges](#) at the intersections of their identity that result in discrimination and mistreatment.[5] These challenges revolve around [inadequate healthcare and mental health resources](#), housing and employment discrimination, and a stagnant economic trajectory.[6] What's more, for this community, societal discrimination and mistreatment have resulted in the loss of life. Queer and trans people of colour have [higher suicide rates](#) and are more likely to be victims of fatal violence.[7]

In response to all of these challenges, as well as frequent exclusion from their own biological families, the idea of "chosen families" emerged in trans communities.

These are non-biological networks of individuals who support each other in the same ways as traditional family units might.[8] As many queer and trans spaces collapsed during the pandemic, chosen families suffered too.[9]

This inspired me to begin pre-production on a documentary about chosen families titled *Mother Wit*.

Like many aspiring journalists, I always hope my work will invoke change. And I saw a gap in reporting on queer and trans issues, primarily when they centred people of colour. I wanted to fill that void.

My pre-reporting led me to the Brooklyn GHOST Project, a non-profit offering food, fun, and community for Black and Brown trans people.[10] I showed up and met the executive director, Mother LaTravious.

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[5] Mahowald, L. (2022) LGBTQ people of color encounter heightened discrimination, Center for American Progress. Available at: https://www.americanprogress.org/article/lgbtq-people-color-encounter-heightened-discrimination/

[6] HRC Foundation. QTBIPOC mental health and well-being, Human Rights Campaign. Available at: https://www.hrc.org/resources/qtbipoc-mental-health-and-well-being

[7] HRC Foundation. The state of mental health in LGBTQ communities of color, Human Rights Campaign. Available at: https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets/BIPOC-Mental-Health-LGBTQ-2021.pdf

[8] Bellamy-Walker, T. (2022) How the Black queer community is re-imagining the family tree, NBC News. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/black-queer-community-re-imagining-family-tree-rcna16134

[9] Compton, J. (20AD) 'chosen families' ruptured: How covid-19 hit an LGBTQ lifeline, NBC News. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/chosen-families-ruptured-how-covid-19-hit-lgbtq-lifeline-n1251849

[10] The Brooklyn Ghost Project Presents The S.O.O.L. Program. Brooklyn Ghost Project. Available at: https://brooklynghostproject.org/tgnc-mentorship

She was rehearsed and media savvy, and so was her family. If I wanted to get past the surface and make an in-depth documentary about family dynamics, I'd have a big hill to climb.

Mother LaTravious (centre) surrounded by her chosen family. Credit: Rajvi Desai

Telling Mother LaTravious's story taught me lessons that journalism school didn't, and sometimes those lessons even contradicted the rules I had been taught.

But when you're reporting on a minority community that has been the target of violence, winning their trust may require you to rethink what you know about objectivity, keeping subjects at arm's length, and maintaining a detached observer role. It will also challenge your expectation around speed of access, depth of access, and your entitlement to access in the first place.

Journalists often parachute in and out of trans communities to report on them. As a result, stories are mostly seen and told from the outside in. Many stories centre policy and reform – with the occasional story on trans excellence – while stories about trans communities of colour mainly centre death.

Because of the time crunch, police reports are essential tools for reporting death. However, this leads to under and misreporting about death in the community.[11] Journalists often deadname or misgender the deceased because of heavy reliance on

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[11] HRC Foundation (no date) Fatal violence against the transgender and gender non-conforming community in 2022, Human Rights Campaign. Available at: https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-community-in-2022

police reports that don't always use the correct information when identifying people.[12] These stories create outrage in the community.

Stories about trans communities of colour frequently over-rely on experts who are not in the community. Lived experts from the community are seen as unreliable narrators – called on only for colourful anecdotes.

If I was going to break through with the LaTravious family, I'd need them to unlearn what they had come to expect of journalists and win their trust: I wanted more than a soundbite.

And I would need to learn a few things myself to achieve that. I'm thankful to say that, over time, I was able to build trust that significantly helped change the course of the film. Here are the five lessons in trust-building with minority sources affected by violence that most impacted my documentary:

1. *Invest time and research in the community*

2. *Work on a team with shared values*

3. *Be flexible with access limitations*

4. *Build transparent communication*

5. *Practice trauma-informed reporting*

Here, I'll unpack each of these lessons, with examples from Mother LaTravious, best practice from the available literature, and links to resources where possible.[13]

Resource

The Trans Journalists Association's style guide states that "trans people should be interviewed and quoted as experts, not just subjects. Trans people are the experts on trans lives and experiences… there are cis experts worth quoting within specific specialties; however, when you write about trans issues, do not include more experts who are cis than trans."

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[12] Kelly , M.L. (2018) How deadnaming factors into police investigations involving transgender women, NPR. Available at: https://www.npr.org/2018/08/14/638629397/how-deadnaming-factors-into-police-investigations-involving-transgender-women

[13] To reduce the number of footnotes, we have retained the most relevant reference in each instance, and moved the rest to a Reading List section at the end of this project.

Invest time and research in the community

Taking off my hat

When I first arrived at the Brooklyn GHOST Project and met Mother LaTravious, she assumed I'd be in and out like all the other journalists who reported on her in the past.

News organisations and reporters frequented the GHOST Project at such a rate that members of the Wednesday meetings had become immune to cameras and reporters and the excitement they can create.

Every few months – around holidays like Pride Month, Juneteenth, or Trans Day of Visibility – reporters would show up for interviews. These encounters gave Mother LaTravious a keen knowledge of how journalists report for short news segments: they'd ask her, her staff, and clients questions; get colourful shots; and then disappear.

If I wanted to tell a more nuanced story about Mother LaTravious and her chosen children, I knew I would have to continuously show up, so I did. I attended every Wednesday meeting and event they had with my camera in hand, which surprised Mother LaTravious who didn't think I'd stick around.

But not even my continued presence at gatherings could sway Mother LaTravious out of her PR persona, nor did it bring me closer to her chosen children. They kept me at arm's length.

It wasn't until I started showing up without my camera or an agenda that things started to change. The first time I attended a Wednesday meeting without a camera, I attended as a member. I sat down and broke bread with them, answered questions about myself, and played games with the group.

What surprised me the most about my interactions was that they had no clue who I was. I had attended meetings for months, but my journalist "hat" and camera kept them from seeing me not only as a person, but as a person they could trust.

This revelation led me to show up without an agenda more often. As I did, Mother LaTravious began to let her guard down and her children let me in – not only into their lives but their dynamic with Mother LaTravious as well.

Demonstrating my research

I conducted many master interviews during my time with Mother LaTravious. [14] In our second interview, I asked a simple question based on some research I conducted: "I know that within the community, it is believed that Black trans women's life expectancy is 33 to 35. What does it mean to you that you've lived past the age of expectancy?"

Mother LaTravious was so engaged in the question that she divulged more about herself than she had ever done before. She told me how, as a young child living in Florida, she used education and writing as a tool to deal with homophobia and transphobia which lead to a career in rap that helped harness her voice. However, the discrimination she

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[14] A "master interview" within the context of a documentary refers to a pivotal and central interview that plays a crucial role in communicating the primary themes, message, or informational content of the documentary. The master interview serves as a foundational element that guides the narrative and structure of the documentary, often receiving extensive coverage in the final production.

faced as a Black trans woman in the job market motivated her to become a scam artist on the side, moving further away from her love of education.

She turned her life around and dedicated herself to caring for her community after being diagnosed with kidney failure in her late 20s. This became her origin story in the film.

My pre-reporting had taught me that life expectancy was a crucial topic in the community, especially since many Black trans women's lives are cut short due to violence, and many cases go unsolved. As a result, the community I spent time in illustrated how important living another year was and held such an admiration for the Black trans women who made it past the age of expectancy. For me, this was an essential question to ask.

Earning trust in minority communities takes time, especially if those communities are mistrustful of the media and journalists. In order to tell more nuanced, well-rounded stories, journalist and media outlets must invest in these communities with one of the most important assets they have: time.

In the era of the 24/7 news cycle, newsrooms find themselves reporting and publishing around the clock. Deadlines are tight and competition is fierce. To meet demands, journalists often parachute in and out of people's lives and communities to report about them quickly.

When this method is used in minority communities, stories quickly become flat pastiches with stereotypical narratives. It makes these communities one-dimensional to the wider public and increases the community's distrust.[15]

The trust gap in trans communities (particularly Black trans communities) was widened by several factors: privacy and safety concerns after being named in stories; the historic role journalism has played in creating stereotypical, degrading narratives of trans people; the lack of well-rounded Black trans identities in stories; misgendering and/or deadnaming sources in stories and quotes; the lack of nuance and depth in news stories; and journalism's focus on covering stories of adversity or personal struggle.[16]

According to the Tow Center for Digital Journalism:

> *"A lack of trust in media, issues of perceived relevance, and a sense of relentless negativity have led many readers to vacillate*

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[15] Evans, R.D., Harris, J. and Morton, A. (2020) Portrayal and Perception II Content Analysis of Pittsburgh Media Coverage of African Americans. rep. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Heinz Endowments

[16] Billard, T.J. (2018) "Writing in the margins: Mainstream news media representations of transgenderism," International Journal of Communication [Preprint]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/4q8f3

> *between disengaging from the news for periods of time, and seeking out alternative sources from interpersonal and social media networks. Making an attempt at repair will require a shift in how media outlets conceive of their role – from providers of information to conveners of discussion around what issues are important to the communities they serve and how they should be covered."[17]*

Some paths to identifying causes of distrust include reading the comment section of articles to see what community members are saying about how they are covered, following journalist and media groups dedicated to the community at large, researching where community forums happen (online and in person), and attending with the goal of just listening. If journalists listen for long enough, they will not only learn why distrust exists but who the community stakeholders are, the issues they face, where coverage is missing, and more.

What does it look like when a journalist takes action to dedicate time to dismantling distrust? It's not just listening to what communities have to say about how they are reported on but engaging with them on an interpersonal level and giving the community itself the ability to participate in its own coverage.[26]

It may involve spending time in the community without a story to chase. This can include interviewing, attending events, shadowing, or getting to know sources on a personal level. It can also include researching a source and the world they live in.

The information journalists learn by listening should be put into practice in the field to report beyond the stereotypical. Journalists can show marginalised communities that they've done their homework by turning the issues that built distrust into reporting questions, and by working with the community to cover stories that break into new narratives.

This, in turn, can increase the community's interest in news and change the engagement they have with journalists. It can also lead to the hiring of community contributors, or collaborating with trusted entities within the community to highlight ongoing communal conversations.

I've highlighted some resources on this topic on the following page.

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[17] Wenzel, A.W. et al. (2018) Listening is not enough: Mistrust and local news in urban and Suburban Philly, Columbia Journalism Review. Tow Center for Digital Journalism. Available at: https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/mistrust-and-local-news-urban-and-suburban-philly.php

Resources

Catalyzing Storytelling in Communication Infrastructure Theory: A Study of Local Ethnic Media: a paper by Jean Jiyoung Lim, Yong-Chan Kim & Susan Koch-Weser (2022) in the Journal of Health Communication (pp. 312-325)

City Bureau's Public Newsroom: A free workshop series, the Public Newsroom aims to create an open space where anyone can gather to discuss and deconstruct local issues, share resources and knowledge, and meet new people.

Community Journalism: (May require login.) A guide to community journalism published in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Journalism Studies*, 2020 (Edited by: Henrik Örnebring)

Is Movement Journalism What's Needed During this Reckoning over Race and Inequality? An article from Nieman Reports by Tina Vasquez that addresses the "activist" debate.

Listening is not Enough: A Tow Report published by Columbia Journalism Review that explores mistrust and local news in urban and suburban Philly

News Voices: An inspiring project that organises with communities, journalists, and newsrooms to build power and advocate for the news, information, and narratives that people need to thrive.

Press On: A series of workshops and training titled Level Up, designed to help journalists in America's South understand emergent justice issues.

Solutions Journalism Network: A network of journalists and training programmes that present a new approach for reporting on issues from a constructive angle.

The Media Deserts Project: An interactive map of all the places in the U.S. where people live in media deserts – places where it is difficult to access daily, local news and information

Transitioning to Solutions Journalism: One Newsroom's Shift to Solutions-focused Reporting: (May require a login.) An article in Volume 22 of *Journalism Studies*. Authors Kyser Lough & Karen McIntyre review how *Montgomery Advertiser* reinvented their coverage.

What does movement journalism mean for journalism as a whole? Gabe Schneider's article for RJI Online that summarises a "fissure in American journalism".

Work on a team with shared values

Finding Rajvi

As I looked to bring on a co-director for the documentary, I knew my reputation would be on the line.

By this point, I had been able to establish a small level of trust that left Mother LaTravious and her children comfortable with my presence. I was keenly aware that the level of access the documentary needed would require an immense amount of trust building. Whoever I added to the crew would play a huge role in that build.

As a result, I looked to add people who had the same values as me when it came to reporting on trans communities.

Ideally, since I was reporting on the Black trans community in Brooklyn, the crew member would be Black and trans themselves and familiar with the community dynamics of the neighbourhood.

At a minimum I knew I'd need the following: someone who understood how to treat trans people respectfully, who believed that trans lives mattered, who had a deep knowledge on what it was like to be trans, who knew about the problems affecting the trans community caused by society and institutions, who would conduct themselves as a guest within the community, who knew that trust would take time and patience, who was not afraid to rethink how stories about trans people could be told, and who would be willing to re-evaluate journalism's role based on how we have failed the community.

That last one was at the top of the list of what I was looking for in a co-director.

During my search I found plenty of people who were interested in reporting on the trans community. However, many of the people I talked to were hoping to be educated about the community at the same time or failed to use my correct pronouns.

I needed crew who were actively educating themselves not only on trans people but the Black trans community in Brooklyn, especially if I wanted to have more nuanced, deep conversations. So I kept looking.

Eventually I found Rajvi Desai: a South Asian trans nonbinary documentary filmmaker and journalist who was also looking to push the boundaries on what journalistic stories about trans people can look like. His work focused on gender issues as they intersect with race, class, and caste, both in the United States and in South Asia.

He had extensive knowledge on what it was like to be trans and was well versed in the problems trans people faced.

Even with our shared values aligning, Rajvi would go through his own tests with Mother LaTravious and her children. They didn't welcome him with open arms, but they were not dismissive of him either. Rajvi had to prove he was worthy of their trust, and they looked to me to be the liaison for that.

Rajvi used his spare time to learn more about the local community in Brooklyn. He dug deeper into the pre-reporting I had done, paid attention to who the main players in the community were, noted the communal conversations taking place, and took the time to

> continuously educate himself on the intersections of being both Black and trans in the United States and how that effected Mother LaTravious and her children.
>
> Rajvi, like me, knew that trust building would take time and that in the meantime he would be "a guest in their home" as they slowly learned to trust him. It took months before they trusted Rajvi in the same ways they trusted me. However, patience and dedication to understanding the community helped us dig deeper into the film and grow stronger bonds with our participants than I ever could have hoped for.

Getting sources to trust an individual journalist is one thing, but what about the others working alongside you, like photographers, producers, editors, crew, and so on? Forging trust is not a solo activity: it is likely to require partnership with other journalists, colleagues, and media companies.

Ultimately, the journalist who earns the trust of a marginalised community bears responsibility for the other people they bring into the community's orbit. These additional colleagues are let into safe spaces under the assumption that the trusted journalist who referred them can ensure their sources will be safe and respected.

The consequence for not vetting colleagues can be lose access to the community. Furthermore, marginalised communities are often interconnected, so losing access to one source due to negligence can mean losing access to all potential sources because the community regularly shares experiences about harmful situations and people as a means to keep its members safe.

To ensure that trust continues to grow, journalist should try to partner with people who understand and respect a set of shared values.

Journalism already has a shared value system that many media organisations, outlets, and journalist abide by. These values have stood the test of time, cultural changes, and technology advances:
1. Journalists should strive to publish news accounts that are balanced, accurate, relevant, and complete
2. Journalists should strive to publish those news accounts without causing preventable harm
3. Journalists should strive to give citizens information needed for self-governance.[18, 19]

While these values lay a foundation, it's also important that journalists and teams working on the same stories have shared values for the communities they work with.

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[18] Wilkins, L. and Christians, C.G. (2020) "Essential Shared Values and 21st Century Journalism," in The Routledge Handbook of Mass Media Ethics. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 30–42

[19] Elliott, D. (1988) "All is not relative: Essential shared values and the press," Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 3(1), pp. 28–32. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/08900528809358306

This helps ensure that journalists are moving together as a unit while protecting sources from harm and disinformation, which can cause trust to diminish.[20]

It's so easy to perpetuate myths when you are not part of a community. Ensure that the people collaborating with you don't carry these myths into the field with them. Some examples of myths about the trans community are outlined here.[21] And, if you are working with a marginalised community, seek out and actively use and refer to the guides like this one.[22] More resources are below.

Resources

TransMediaWatch – Common Misunderstandings: A quick guide to common myths about trans communities.

11 Myths About Transgender People: A 2015 Vox article by German Lopez

Debunking the Myths: A video series by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

HRC's Brief Guide: HRC's 8-point guide (also available in Spanish)

Understanding the Transgender Community: HRC's intro to trans issues (also available in Spanish)

The Media Often Gets Trans Stories Wrong: An article explaining and giving links to The Transgender Law Center's media guides

Trans Journalists Association Style Guide: A stylebook and coverage guide from TJA

NLGJA Transgender Reporting Guidance: Guidance from the Association of LGBTQ+ Journalists

GLAAD: Resources for Media Professionals: A list of all resources created by GLAAD for journalists and entertainment writers

Transgender Law Center Journalist Resource Series: Resources for reporting on athletic bans and medical bans

Making Your Writing and Reporting Transgender-Inclusive: An article by Tyler Santora for The Open Notebook

[20] Rook, E. (2022) Reckless NY Times reporting fuels disinformation about trans youth, LGBTQ Nation. Available at: https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2022/11/reckless-ny-times-reporting-fuels-disinformation-trans-youth/

[21] Common Misunderstandings. Trans Media Watch. Available at: https://transmediawatch.org/common-misunderstandings

[22] HRC's brief guide to getting transgender coverage right. Human Rights Campaign. HRC Foundation. Available at: https://www.hrc.org/resources/reporting-about-transgender-people-read-this

Be flexible with access limitations

At home with Mother LaTravious

Mother LaTravious eventually granted Rajvi and I more access to film at her non-profit. We went from only filming Wednesday meetings, to events, to filming business meetings and everything in between. But Mother LaTravious always became uncomfortable when asked if we could film her outside of her role at the Brooklyn GHOST Project.

I assumed she didn't understand why it was necessary, so we took the time to explain why we wanted to capture her as a whole person – even outside of work – to aid the audience in understanding and relating to her as a person. Our explanation did nothing to comfort Mother LaTravious as she continued to resist.

I began to wonder if she did not want people to know or see where she lived for fear of her safety or embarrassment.

When I finally asked directly about her hesitancies, she admitted she was worried what people would say about the big TV screen in her bedroom.

She also felt that her personal life was not interesting enough to be filmed. Outside of work she just spent her time watching TV, undergoing dialysis, or working on new ideas for her non-profit.

It took many long and patient conversations over several months. Once we were allowed into her home, these shoots became the film's most intimate scenes.

When communities mistrust journalists, it becomes hard to gain access to sources' personal lives and intimate details. It's not hard to see why.

Coverage of trans communities has increased over the past few years, but this increased visibility has made communities big targets for right-wing groups, activists and legislation that restricts or even bans what trans people have access to. This is reflected on online platforms, like Facebook, where anti-trans posts are seen to increase engagement.[23]

And the news coverage is usually centred on either legal moves or stories capturing violence. Stories that centre the richness of the community or achievements are not seen as often, especially for Black trans women. [24]

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[23] Suen, B., Evans, C. and Paterson, A. (2021) Right-leaning Facebook pages earned nearly two-thirds of interactions on posts about trans issues, Media Matters for America. Available at: https://www.mediamatters.org/facebook/right-leaning-facebook-pages-earned-nearly-two-thirds-interactions-posts-about-trans

[24] Trans Lives; Positive Visibility. HRC Digital Reports. Available at: https://reports.hrc.org/trans-lives-positive-visibility

As visibility for a minority community grows, so does the chance for violence and discrimination.[25] This is why it's important to consider the risks to your sources and how increased access to their personal lives could affect them.[26]

As documentary filmmaker Joe Berlinger said:

> *"I would never allow them [journalists/filmmakers] to make a film about my tragedy. I am keenly aware of the hypocrisy of asking someone for access that I myself would probably not grant."[27]*

Journalists should thoroughly explain to sources why they need access when they initially ask for it. Providing context for the request makes it easier to weigh.

If a source denies access, journalists shouldn't press them further for access or manipulate. But it is OK to ask sources about their hesitancies, listen to what they say, and try to address them. Often concerns ease over time, meaning you can reapproach the question at a later point.

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[25] Burns, K. (2019) The internet made trans people visible. it also left them more vulnerable., Vox. Vox. Available at: https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/12/27/21028342/trans-visibility-backlash-internet-2010

[26] Iyamah, J. (2018) Covering LGBTQ issues brings risk of threats and retaliation for journalists and their sources, Committee to Protect Journalists. Available at: https://cpj.org/2018/05/covering-lgbtq-issues-brings-risk-of-threats-and-r/

[27] Milewski, A. Honest truths: Documentary filmmaking ethics, American Documentary. Available at: https://www.amdoc.org/engage/resources/honest-truths-ethics-documentary-film/honest-truths-documentary-filmmaking-ethics/

Build transparent communication

Crossing wires with Mother LaTravious

One of the first things I did after meeting Mother LaTravious was to establish transparent communication – or so I believed.

At the time, I thought open communication meant being transparent about what it takes to make a documentary, what I would need from them, and at what point in the process I was. It helped give them a real stake in the process.

But, over time, my understanding of open communication changed. As production developed and scenes started to come together in the edit, our communication evolved to sharing rough-cut scenes with Mother LaTravious and her children.

Our intention was to show them how the story was evolving as a way stoke their enthusiasm about continuing to participate. It was also to better illustrate what the gaps in filming were and why additional access was needed.

Sharing our progress visually helped us gather more information from Mother LaTravious and her children. After seeing how our shoot of her daughter's birthday party turned into a crucial scene in the story, she had a better understanding of how events that she considered unimportant showed the dynamics of her family. After this, Mother started to share more opportunities for us to film with her family.

One of the most important things we established was how to effectively communicate with Mother LaTravious and her children. We found that weekly in-person visits with Mother LaTravious were the most effective way to keep things rolling. This helped us avoid confusion that repeatedly happened over text messages.

If face-to-face was not possible that week, we made a point to talk to them over Zoom to ensure we all had a clear understanding of what the next two weeks would look like.

Building trust with minority communities requires open communication. Looping them into the reporting process early means they know what to expect and surprises can be avoided.

The process a journalist must follow to publish a piece can look different depending on where you work and what medium you work in, so let sources know what this process will look like and what to expect.

Honesty and clarity are a must. Explain how long the process will take, what might be removed in the editing process, how it might be promoted on social media, and all the different people involved at various stages. Set expectations about how available you will (and won't) be after publication and stick to your word.

It's particularly important to talk through the possible repercussions of publishing when your sources are named.

It can be helpful to show sources past work so they get an idea of what to expect and how they might potentially be used as a source.[28]

The idea here is to bring sources along for the ride, so they know they are a part of the process as a collaborator, that they have a story worth telling, and can trust you enough to wield that story through their craft in the way they see fit.

Being a transparent communicator also means being a good listener. Figure out what the most effective method of communication is for sources. When miscommunications arise, figure out to how improve communication with sources.

Beware of taking communication shortcuts when you don't have to: having in-person meetings is the best way for journalists to show that they are still committed to being present in the community.

There's a community/networking effect to working in this way: not only will more sources be willing to work with you as your reputation grows, but you make it easier for other members of that community to see journalists as trustworthy too. Of course, the opposite is also true.

Resources

Tips for Communicating with and for LGBTQI+ Communities: A guide created by the National Institutes of Health, including a link to terms and definitions developed by the NIH Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion.

How deep listening can make you a better journalist Journalist Fellow Daniel Clarke wrote about this issue for RISJ

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[28] How to gain the trust of your documentary subjects (2014) PennLaw. Available at: https://www.law.upenn.edu/live/news/2989-how-to-gain-the-trust-of-your-documentary-subjects

Practice trauma-informed reporting

Trauma Informed Reporting with Mother LaTravious

Rajvi and I always followed trauma-informed reporting guidelines while filming, but the most significant application happened in our final interview with Mother LaTravious.

We knew our most taxing question would be one about her longevity and her legacy as an aging trans woman.

We followed our normal procedures: mentioned at the start of the interview that this topic would come up, sandwiched emotional questions with easier ones. But when the time came for the actual question, she was clearly overwhelmed by thoughts of her own mortality, fears about her legacy, and sadness at not being able to care for the community she had created.

We sat with her as she processed this, asked if she needed a moment and gave her space. After a while, we requested consent to continue. After the interview, we made sure to ask for consent to use the interview in the film and ensured she had a support system who would be around after we left. Then we thanked her.

What we didn't know at the time was that this was our last interview with Mother LaTravious: she died two months later, radically changing the course of our film from a documentary about her chosen family to one about how chosen families maintain legacy from one generation to the next.

Many trans communities of colour face trauma as a result of transphobia.[29]

Transphobic beliefs can lead to institutional, systemic, and societal mistreatment of people who don't fit into the gender binary.[30] Examples of mistreatment include housing, employment, and healthcare discrimination, as well as violence and the threat of violence.

In turn, this leads to an increased risk for depression and suicidality among trans people, and the murder of trans people.[31] Incorporating trauma-informed reporting is paramount in a community like this.

Trauma-informed reporting aims to make journalists aware of the potential for strong emotional, mental, and physical reactions to trauma. These reactions may

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[29] Singh, A.A. and McKleroy, V.S. (2011) "'Just getting out of bed is a revolutionary act': The resilience of transgender people of color who have survived traumatic life events.," Traumatology, 17(2), pp. 34–44. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765610369261

[30] Planned Parenthood (no date) What's transphobia and Transmisia?, Planned Parenthood. Available at: https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/gender-identity/transgender/whats-transphobia

[31] Jefferson, K., Neilands, T.B. and Sevelius, J. (2013) "Transgender women of color: Discrimination and depression symptoms," Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care, 6(4), pp. 121–136. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1108/eihsc-08-2013-0013

happen in the source in response to a question, but can equally arise in the journalist who is recording a response.[32]

According to Jo Healy, author and founder of the practice, "Trauma awareness is built around psycho-education to enable journalists to understand the potential impact of their work on the individual they are interviewing but also the potential impact on themselves."[33]

It puts the source's trauma at the forefront in journalists' minds and requires them to centre that trauma in how they interact, report and interview sources. This method is less harmful to sources and shows them a level of care not seen in traditional reporting. It may help engender more trust from interviewees.

When interviews are conducted using trauma informed reporting, sources are given the space and control to share their experiences by choice, on their own time, and in their own way.

Trauma-informed reporting humanises sources by recognising the trauma they have been through, how that trauma is currently affecting them, and how the interview will affect them in the future.

When interviewing sources who have experienced trauma without due care runs the risk of causing harm via probing or insensitive questions that disregard cultural considerations, sensitivities, or unconscious bias.

Trauma informed reporting also recognises the potential impact for journalist working in traumatic situations. Telling hard stories can affect journalists emotionally as well as mentally.[34] As a result, communal care within the team or desk should be established to maintain resilience.

Trauma informed reporting involves three phases:

- Before the interview
- During the interview
- After the interview

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[32] Craven, J. (2022) Why some journalists are centering trauma-informed reporting, Nieman Reports. Available at: https://niemanreports.org/articles/mental-health-trauma-sources/#:~:text=Trauma%2Dinformed%20reporting%20recognizes%20what,reduce%20anyone%20to%20their%20trauma

[33] Healey, J. (2022) Safety of journalists covering trauma and distress 'Do no harm', UNESCODOC Digital Library. Available at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381200

[34] Miller, N.S. (2022) Trauma-informed journalism: What it is and why it's important + tips, The Journalist's Resource. Available at: https://journalistsresource.org/home/trauma-informed-journalism-explainer/

Before the interview

Before the interview, journalists should remember to give sources as much autonomy as possible. Sources should be able to say "no" to interviews, even if they have already talked about the topic before.

If sources say yes to being interviewed, let them pick where the interview will be held (if possible) so they can be in a space that makes them feel comfortable and safe. It also means they are in a space to access aftercare once the interview is done.

In addition to interviewing sources in a safe space, journalists should go over what sources can expect on the day of the interview. This includes sharing the topics the interview will cover and where the article will publish. This gives sources the ability to really decide if sharing information is within their best interests, and allows them to mentally prepare for topics that may be hard to navigate.

Even after obtaining consent for the interview, the journalist should explain to sources that they can start and stop the interview at any time, for any reason.

Maintaining your own resilience

While preparing sources for an interview that may involve trauma, think about how the topics discussed and exposure to their source's suffering will affect you as vicarious trauma.

Check in with yourself about your own possible triggers and devise a plan of what to do if you are triggered during the interview. The plan can include teaming up with another journalist who can pick up questioning. For journalist conducting a solo interview techniques like grounding or breathing may aid in subsiding triggers.[35]

Knowing how to respond to your own emotions means the source is not forced to expend energy to comfort and care for you in an already hard interview situation. Leave room before your next interview if possible.

During the interview

During the interview journalist should prioritise making sources feel safe in their presence before focusing on the interview questions at hand. Journalists should greet sources with gratitude and let them know that their time and information is valued. Transparency is key so it's important for journalists to reiterate the interview topics to be discussed and remind sources they can start and stop the interview at any time.

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[35] Dubberley, S. and Grant, M. (2017) Journalism and Vicarious Trauma: A Guide for Journalists, Editors and News Organisations, FirstDraft. Available at: https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/vicarioustrauma.pdf

Most importantly, journalists should show compassion to their sources and think about how their questions will affect the source and their ability to continue. If a source breaks down, sit with them, and give space to process. Ask the source if they would like a moment to themselves, and then ask for consent to continue once the source is ready.

After the interview

After the interview, it's essential that journalists check in with their sources to see how they are doing and ask for permission once again to use the material collected.

Before leaving journalists should thank sources and take initiative in keeping sources looped into the remainder of the process.[36]

Maintaining resilience

Debriefs are an excellent way to deal with the after-effects of an emotional interview. If you're working on a team, ask each other how it went. If you're working alone and have access to an Employee Assistance Programme, make use of it – or a similar service that offers debriefing. [37]

Typically a debriefing is a safe space to talk about what went well, what could have gone better, how you are feeling after the interview, and what is currently sitting with you.

Outside of debriefing, journalists should find methods of self-care that work to give their mind and body a chance to centre themselves in the world that exists outside of the interview.[38]

Resources

Best practices for trauma-informed journalism: An article by Maggie Doheny for the Reynold's Journalism Institute

Documenting Survivors of Trauma: A good guide to Ethics and Consent

Journalism and Trauma: Poynter's free course on how to interview subjects who have experienced trauma

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[36] Doheny, M. (2021) Best practices for trauma-informed journalism, Reynolds Journalism Institute. Available at: https://rjionline.org/news/best-practices-for-trauma-informed-journalism/

[37] Brayne, M. (2007) Trauma & Journalism: A Guide For Journalists, Editors & Managers, Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. Available at:
https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf

[38] Shapiro, B. (2021) How journalists can practice self-care when reporting on community trauma, Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma. Available at: https://dartcenter.org/resources/how-journalists-can-practice-self-care-when-reporting-community-trauma

Journalism and Vicarious Trauma: A PDF guide created by First Draft News for journalists, editors, and news organisations

Safety of journalists covering trauma and distress 'Do no harm': Jo Healey's guide published by UNESCO

Self-care tips for journalists: Naseem Miller's article for The Journalist's Resource, including links for more resources

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma: A global network including events, resources, a style guide, community support network, and training opportunities.

Trauma-informed journalism: Tips for telling important stories, better from Canada's Pick Up Communications

Trauma-informed journalism: What it is, why it's important and tips for practicing it: Another useful article by Naseem Miller for The Journalist's Resource

Trauma Reporting: Jo Healey's website including resources and links to training

8 Breathing Exercises: Medically reviewed exercises that relive anxiety

30 Grounding Techniques: A summary of mental and physical soothing techniques

How Journalists Can Practice Self-Care: Dart Center's guide to self-care

How Journalists Can Take Care of Themselves: Poynter's Institute's guide to self-care

Conclusion

Building trust in communities vulnerable to violence requires that journalists rethink and reimagine the rules. This comes with risks to journalism in its current form. But I argue that to mend what has been broken, risks are necessary and there is a reward too: regaining authentic voices and audiences.

Invest time and research in the community

While investing time in community is an important factor in building trust, the institution of journalism, as it currently stands, does not leave much room for this. In most newsrooms there are two types of stories journalists give their time to: those that are told quickly and efficiently to keep up with current events and those that require more time through investigative journalism.

Expanding the resources of time and research needed to build trust in marginalized communities (whose stories neither fit neatly inside current events, nor warrant investigative journalism), is likely to eat into profits at a time when many newsrooms are operating from a place of scarcity.

But a lack of trust for journalists on the ground translates into lack of trust for media organisations at large. If journalists only show up in a community when there is a story that media organizations deem worthy of telling, what marginalized communities often see are journalists showing up when there is a byline for them to gain – especially when reporting on marginalized communities can be seen as trendy and journalists stop showing up once stories are published.

Remember that participating in the reporting process can open these communities to dangerous backlash. They are deserving of time if we desire access.

What about the fundamental belief in the industry that spending extra time in communities without a journalist hat on can affect a journalist's ability to remain objective? Sitting in community does not mean a journalist loses their ability to report ethically. We need to reject the idea that neutrality is the saving grace that makes an ethical reporter. Journalists who invest time in communities gain perspectives that add nuanced context to stories that may otherwise be lost when reporting on communities from the outside in, instead of the inside out.[39]

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[39] Scott, B. (2021) *Amid wave of anti-trans bills, trans reporters say 'telling our own stories' is vital*, *NPR*. Available at: https://www.npr.org/2021/05/07/993838090/amid-wave-of-anti-trans-bills-trans-reporters-say-telling-our-own-stories-is-vit

Work on a team with shared values

Creating a team that shares values beyond journalistic ethics – one that leans into the humanity of the marginalized communities they report on – can be perceived as a slippery slope away from objectivity.

But it also ensures the humanity of people reported on is preserved, which can help prevent the harm that occurs when journalists report on communities they are not familiar with. I believe collaboration means both can be held in balance.

The humanity of many marginalized communities is often called into question, especially when communities sit farther away from societal norms. In the case of trans issues, this would look like a team interested in reporting on Trans Lives Matter not as a political talking point but as a plea for access to personal safety and care. Seeing marginalized communities on a personal level instead of a theoretical one is an important step in restoring trust at multiple levels.

Be flexible with access limitations

In journalism, access is the gold standard: without it stories can lack context; with it stories can stand out from their competitors. However, some journalists behave as though access should be automatically given and not earned. This entitlement, coupled with deadline pressure, can be incredibly counterproductive and potentially exploitative. We are not entitled to people's personal lives. Take the time to address hesitancies, allow concerns to ease, and understand the effects of visibility.

Build transparent communication

Building transparent communication means working with sources as collaborators instead of subjects. The perceived risk, from an institutional standpoint, is that journalists who collaborate with participants lose control of their work. Objectivity may again be questioned.

For communities that are already disadvantaged, journalism is just another in a long list of institutions that was not designed to support them. Using transparent communication helps to shift the power dynamic between journalists and their collaborators from one where trust is something that is blindly given to one where trust is earned.

Practice trauma-informed reporting

In many newsrooms, trauma-informed reporting is not something that is used daily. Instead, journalists use this style of reporting when there is visible trauma that can be easily identified. However, in many marginalized communities, trauma may not be as evident to the untrained eye as, for example, it might be in warzone.
In marginalized communities, trauma can be underlying and complex, making it harder for journalists to identify before going in for an interview. Using trauma-

informed reporting as default has huge risks: it means their collaborators have the ability to end the interview at any time.

It requires journalists to cede their power, and it can hinder the turnaround time of a story. But trauma-informed reporting also ensures interviewees experience less harm. It also contributes to the long-term resilience of journalists to the moral injury sometimes caused by traditional reporting.

A final note on objectivity

Many of the ways to build trust in marginalized communities directly interfere with the ethics of objectivity and neutrality. Here's the bombshell: the objectivity that journalism aims to achieve has never existed.

We always report from our own lens and, even when we try our best to move outside of it, we are still faced with reporting from an angle that aligns with the subjectivities of the society we live in. As a result, marginalized communities are left out, and we report from an abstracted debate standpoint versus reporting that materially engages with the reality of marginalized communities.[40]

The death of objectivity is not akin to the death of truth. As journalist Lewis Raven Wallace puts it: "We can check our facts, tell the truth, and hold the line without pretending that there is no ethical basis to the work that we do. We should own the fact that to tell the stories and promote the voices of marginalized and targeted people is not a neutral stance from the sidelines, but an important front in a lively battle against the narrow-mindedness, tyranny, and institutional oppression that puts all of our freedoms at risk."[41]

Connection and closeness to community is not a hinderance, but an asset to journalists, giving them the ability to tell fuller stories about the communities they report on.[42,43]

Acknowledging and working from this mindset will ultimately help build trust, as it creates space for time, patience, communication, and research to grow.

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[40] Billard, T. and Brennen, T.S.A. (2023) 'Interview with CJ Billard on Mainstream New Coverage of Trans Communities'.

[41] Wallace, L. (2017) Objectivity is dead, and I'm okay with it, Medium. Medium. Available at: https://medium.com/@lewispants/objectivity-is-dead-and-im-okay-with-it-7fd2b4b5c58f

[42] Wenzel, A.D. and Brennen, T.S.A. (2023) 'Interview with Dr. Andrea Wenzel on Community Mistrust'.

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