

General tips on reporting diversity

One of the most important tasks that journalists face is to write about people who are unlike themselves in fundamental ways. Whether a source is of another ethnicity, religious faith, sexual orientation, social class, or economic status, the role of the journalist is often to convey accurately that person's perspective, ideas or worldview—even when the differences are profound.

In areas like South East Europe, where social and ethnic divisions have ripped apart the fabric of numerous communities, achieving that goal can be particularly elusive. It is not, however, impossible. And if journalists wish to facilitate healing and reconciliation within their societies, it is essential that they do their utmost to promote understanding and tolerance—rather than fear and distrust—of difference.

Tips for finding sources

Some strategies relate mainly to specific groups or types of difference. But the following suggestions apply across the board:

★ When you write a story about an ethnic, social, religious or other minority, it is extremely important to interview representatives of that group and include their perspectives in the piece. Otherwise, they are the 'objects' of the article rather than the 'subjects'. No article should criticise an entire group of people without offering members of that group an opportunity to present its own point of view and respond to accusations.

★ Be careful in your use of words and expressions. Words have a great power to hurt as well as to heal. Careless use of language can increase ethnic and social tensions, even if that is not what you mean to do. Be aware of how members of a minority prefer to be called in the language in which you are writing. Albanians refer to themselves as "Shiptars", for example, but when used in Slavic languages this is considered a derogatory word.

★ As you gather material, try to recognise any biases or prejudices you may have. Of course you will have your own opinions, but part of the role of journalism is to question your own and society's preconceived ideas. Many of the beliefs held by one group about another are based not on facts but on stereotypes, although often the stereotypes include an element of truth. For example, some gay men are effeminate (as are some straight men) but most are not.

★ Be careful when you use phrases like “as everyone knows” or “it is evident that.” This sort of expression is usually the way journalists introduce their own biases or those of their own social group, and whatever it is that “everyone knows” is as likely to be false or based on prejudice as it is to reflect a real understanding of the facts of a particular situation.

★ Most situations involving conflicts between social groups are complicated. Both sides generally have legitimate complaints and perspectives, and presenting those perspectives fairly and accurately is an important part of the journalist’s role. Try not to present difficult social questions in black-and-white terms.

★ Including people of different backgrounds is not just a question of fairness and balance it is important for the media from a business perspective as well. Many media outlets limit their potential audience by presenting only the perspective of a single group. If they make an effort to expand coverage to highlight other communities, they can also expand their audience at the same time.

★ Take care to provide some context for the events you are covering. Ethic, religious and other social struggles do not arise out of nothing. Usually there is a long history of conflict, with each side differing widely in its interpretations of the past. Before you can fairly present the material, you must understand what has come before and then you must decide how much of the past you need to include for readers to grasp the essential points.

★ Find unusual ways to write about the issues. Spend a whole day with a homeless person, a lesbian or a refugee to understand what their lives are really like. What are their hopes and fears? Do they conform to your stereotypes or not? If a social group objects to the use of a particular word to describe its members, explore the history of that word. What associations and ideas does it communicate when it is used? Why do people object to it? Why do members of another social group continue to use it?

★ Cultivate sources in other communities. Find people who are willing to keep you informed about what members of their social groups are thinking about, talking about, worrying about. Make contact with non-governmental organisations that represent these communities and ask them what aspects of their lives have not yet been covered. Ask them to keep in touch with you about political, social, economic and other developments that you might not otherwise hear about.

★ Be sceptical. Check facts. You should not accept at face value everything that you hear, whether it comes from a member of your own or another community. Remember that everybody you talk to or interview has a point of view and a particular interest. You need to take their perspective into consideration, but you need to balance it with what you hear from others and what you can observe on your own.

★ Do not treat ethnic and other minorities as monolithic. Even though it may look from the outside as if all members of a community have a single perspective, life is never so

simple. When one group views another as acting as a solid entity, it can greatly exacerbate tensions by feeding the perception that others are to be feared. Talk to as many people as possible within other social groups and present a range of views in as nuanced and clear a manner as possible.

* Many people have strong negative feelings about different social groups. Just because some authorities, politicians, clerics, and others may use offensive terms and expressions when discussing minorities, this does not mean you are required, as a journalist, to include this sort of insulting language in your material. If necessary, paraphrase their words. If you decide to quote them directly, you should mention that members of the minority being discussed consider such language to be insulting and inflammatory.