BNPower:
BUILDING NARRATIVE POWER

A set of multimedia tools that explore why some ideas take root while others disappear.

Go in-depth: Examples & Tips

Recommendations for journalists: Narrative power in reporting

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10 Tips at-a-Glance

1. **Know how the issue is currently reported in the news.**
2. **Ask questions that reveal the social, environmental, and political context for the issue.**
3. **Elevate the importance of prevention and explore possible solutions, including legal frameworks and effective community-led initiatives that could be replicated elsewhere.**
4. **Rethink traditional news pegs.**
5. **Use precise language to describe the issue.**
6. **Use data—including disaggregated data—to illustrate who is affected and how widespread the issue is.**
7. **Expand sources to include underrepresented voices.**
8. **Be transparent about your sources' background, particularly if they have ties to industry or other groups with a financial stake in a particular outcome.**
9. **Examine connections across issues and beats.**
10. **Be explicit about who is benefiting from (current and historical) structural racism and other forms of oppression that contribute to the issue disproportionately affecting other groups.**

As journalists, we have the power to choose what stories get told and what stories don't; decide whose voices we include and whose we don't; elevate some facts or opinions while omitting others. The decisions we make fundamentally affect audiences' understanding of key public health and social justice issues.

Journalists have an extraordinary amount of power to shape how the public view important issues, what policymakers do to address them, and what narratives form the backdrop of people's daily lives. For decades, news outlets recognized this responsibility by striving to be "objective" in their coverage. More recently, journalists are acknowledging that so-called objectivity is a myth—every story has an angle, or frame—and instead aiming to provide readers with stories that are fair, balanced, and accurate. However, old notions of objectivity still plague much of the industry's current coverage, bringing news to readers through a lens that may appear neutral but is anything but. Rather, this lens reflects the status quo, which is still primarily white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male. The media are undergoing a necessary process, that is not for the faint of heart, of resisting the status quo in the name of fair and representative coverage, not letting the dominant culture override their responsibility to the communities they serve.

Collectively, at a macro level, U.S. media outlets comprise a powerful structure that can influence and shift ideologies and customs. At a micro level, this structure consists of a series of decisions reporters and editors and publishers make. Knowingly or unknowingly, media have been reproducing harmful dominant narratives that perpetuate structural inequity for far too long. We have a responsibility to change them. The following tips, consolidated from three decades of news analysis from BMSG, are designed to help reporters use the narrative power of journalism and media to bring equity forward more thoroughly and effectively across their work.

1. Know how the issue is currently reported in the news.

Coverage shapes our understanding of problems—and what we can do about them. Before journalists can improve their reporting on any issue, it's important to identify gaps, misconceptions, or distortions in the current coverage. What themes are dominant? What themes are missing? Whose voices are framed as valuable and whose are left out? Do solutions appear? Is prevention discussed?

Let's look at Covid-19 as an example: Conducting research on how the news media has covered COVID will be an important aspect of understanding this pandemic and addressing future disease outbreaks. In covering COVID and other outbreaks, we have seen that media outlets sometimes:

- Contribute to stereotyping and harassment. For example, the media widely reported the Omicron variant of COVID as the "South African" strain, leading to travel bans on several African countries even as European countries were also facing virus surges.
- Fixate on vaccine hesitancy, rather than the social norms that fuel it or deeper access issues, such as lack of transportation or time off work.
- Omit connections between the virus and social factors that affect it, such as housing, job protections, and public transit.
- Overlook Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities or use quotes from these populations that only describe the problem, rather than solutions.
- Underutilize community-based organizations. These groups are at the forefront of the COVID response and can do more than provide anecdotes about individual residents who are affected. They can and should also be called on to provide policy expertise, commentary on data and trends, and vital perspectives on solutions.

2. Ask questions that reveal the social, environmental, and political context for the issue.

When news stories are framed narrowly, like portraits, they emphasize an individual's role in causing or fixing problems, which can lead to victim-blaming. But when news coverage zooms out and embeds portraits in the landscape, readers and viewers can see the whole picture, the role—and obligation—that our organizations and institutions and government have in helping to dismantle the conditions causing inequities in the first place.

Let's look at sexual violence. Here, the portrait frame holds individuals solely responsible for their own safety, obscures the policies and institutions (like college campuses, youth-serving organizations and others) that can foster a climate where sexual violence can persist, and contributes to the notion that sexual violence is an unfortunate part of life to be managed—rather than a series of behaviors that can be prevented.

For example, after seeing a portrait story about rape, audiences who are asked to talk about solutions might focus on the victim's actions or the character of the person who caused harm. That might mean questioning where the victim went, what they drank, or what they wore—all questions that put the onus on the victim rather than the one who causes the violence. This approach is what fuels advice like telling young women not to walk alone at night, to stick to well-lit paths, and to keep a close guard over their drinks rather than fueling conversations about what we're doing as a society to hold men accountable, eliminate harmful cultural norms around masculinity, teach young boys to recognize and respect healthy boundaries, and, ultimately, keep people safe.

By providing information on the underlying causes and consequences of sexual violence (both to individuals and to society), the media can help the public see that sexual assault is a social problem, rather than a strictly private matter. In stories about sexual violence, journalists can ask questions like:

- What are some of the risk factors at the individual, community, and societal level that make someone more likely to perpetrate rape or other forms of sexual harm?
- What do state laws say about sexual violence? What policy does this employer / campus / institution have in place regarding sexual assault? Is that policy enforced?
- When assaults are reported, who must bear the burden of proof?
- What effects does sexual violence have on health? Education? Economic well-being of men vs women as a result of dominant narratives?

3. Elevate the importance of prevention and explore possible solutions, including legal frameworks and effective/powerful/proven community-led initiatives that could be replicated elsewhere.

The prevention perspective, which focuses on root causes and ways to change societal and community norms is not routinely taught in journalism school or in newsrooms. That means reporters will have to actively seek out such information. "Reporting Inequality: Tools and Methods for Covering Race and Ethnicity" is an excellent resource and the only textbook written by journalists for journalists on how to understand and cover the root causes of structural inequities. This framework matters because without direct discussion of causes, audiences will have a harder time envisioning solutions and may be left with the impression that our most pressing social problems are intractable and inevitable.

Decades of research from BMSG shows that news media often focus on problems rather than solutions, and if solutions are mentioned, they are often at the individual level. In coverage of COVID, this showed up as behavioral suggestions (e.g. wear a mask and get vaccinated) verses systemic solutions (e.g. paid sick leave, worker protections, decrease the number of people in prison and without homes, etc.). With COVID, and future pandemics, reporters need to highlight the infrastructure that will support prevention goes beyond health care and public health. Everything from child care to public transportation to wildfire

mitigation (as areas with higher pollution and smoke can worsen COVID outcomes) to climate change policy plays a role. Covering the public health system, including local health departments and community partners, even in the absence of a crisis will help the public understand what prevention can look like on systemic scale.

Any time reporters cover a public health issue, they should ask questions like:

- What community organizations working on the issue are led by those most impacted?
- What is happening in the community to support prevention? Is it working? How can it be supported, scaled up, replicated in other communities, or built upon?
- What do advocates, practitioners, or government officials think should be done?
- What would make those strategies workable in this community?
- How does targeting prevention to those most impacted benefit all of us?

4. Rethink traditional news pegs.

In today's oversaturated information environment and always-on news cycle, it can be difficult for reporters to break through the noise and grab readers' attention. This contributes to a tendency for news outlets to elevate coverage of rare or extreme stories over the more continual or persistent and to focus more on what's known as episodic reporting, such as the aftermath of a mass shooting, rather than thematic, which is more evergreen and explores the consequences of unfair systems in the absence of an urgent crisis. These newsroom conventions make reporting on longstanding social issues and crises that take place over time, like climate change or day-to-day gun violence, especially problematic. However, a little creative thinking can yield big changes in how the media portray—and how audiences understand—these issues.

A feature on gun violence from The Washington Post provides an excellent example of how reporters can go beyond criminal justice milestones like trials and arrests and capture the daily reality of a complex social issue—and its up-close impact on people's lives—in the absence of a traditional news peg. In this article, the Post documents what a single, typical day in the United States looks like in terms of gun-related trauma and fatalities. Using data and timestamps, they report on how many people were shot (113), died (103), and died by suicide, the most common cause of firearm deaths (63). They also provide snapshots of the people affected and the circumstances leading up to the shootings, such as a "poorly made drink" in a bar and a fight at a gas station, and include video of some of the grueling physical therapy that survivors of gun violence must endure. Overall, the coverage helps to make the issue more tangible for readers and demonstrates that it is an ongoing social issue much broader than mass shootings, which are overrepresented in coverage.

5. Use precise language to describe the issue.

The words reporters use can either help or hinder audiences from understanding an issue's complexity, what factors contribute to it, and how we can address and prevent it. Although there is no single word or description that works in every instance, there are guidelines that journalists can follow to avoid compounding harm by inadvertently reproducing harmful dominant narratives.

Take sexual violence, for example. Journalists should be sure to avoid conflating sex with rape or other forms of violence. But how much detail helps us better understand assault, and what types of details could be counterproductive and lead to sensationalism or voyeurism? On one hand, journalists should avoid sanitized, euphemistic language that may minimize violence; on the other hand, it's important to ensure that language is not overly graphic or salacious or implies consent.

Descriptions of people who commit harm must strike a delicate balance between humanizing the perpetrator and exonerating them. Portraying a person who commits assault as a "monster" may make it harder for people to recognize warning signs for abuse within their own families and social circles. It is important for news audiences to understand that most acts of sexual violence occur between people who already know each other.

Similarly, descriptions of assault survivors must strive for balance. Is it important to avoid portraying victims as powerless or weak. However, many survivors also reject exterior labels of being "strong" or "brave," as it may feel that they are being forced to be inspirational for others, rather than having the space needed to grieve and heal from their trauma. No two survivors are alike, so it's important to talk with your sources about what language resonates with them. Journalists have a difficult job humanizing someone who has experienced violence without revealing details that might put that person at risk or invade their privacy. Identifying ways to do this well is important otherwise stories will have abundant details about the person accused of causing the harm and little about who was harmed.

For a list of words and phrases to avoid, along with alternative language suggestions and descriptions of why they matter, check out this resource from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

6. Use data—including disaggregated data—to illustrate who is affected and how widespread the issue is.

Numbers are important because they help audiences understand the scope of the problem; however, data should be used selectively to prevent creating confusion. One technique journalists can use to make large or complex numbers easier for audiences to digest is "social math". This involves breaking down numbers by place or time or using creative comparisons to help readers better relate. For instance, instead of providing readers solely with a raw statistic on the number of people who are physically abused, raped or stalked by their partners each year, reporters can make the statistic more accessible by providing an easier-to-understand comparison, e.g. "12.7 million survivors is roughly equal to the populations of New York City and Los Angeles combined."

Another example comes from The Justice Policy Institute of Nevada and the ACLU: The groups once teamed up to create a campaign highlighting the need for juvenile justice reform. They developed a series of infographics showing how spending to lock up youth dwarfed funds dedicated to critical social investments such as education. The side-by-side comparisons (a 16-to-1 difference in funds, at the time of the campaign) helped to put each budget item into perspective.

Additionally, when presenting data on inequities, it is critical to include the systemic causes for inequities; otherwise, news audiences may inadvertently blame those who are most impacted. For example, it's important for readers to understand how government-sanctioned redlining (a discriminatory practice in which low-income and communities of color are excluded from receiving services and investments like home loans), dating back to the 1930s, played a role in creating a disproportionate number of Black people who are homeless. If news audiences are given data on homelessness, without being educated on the historical policies and practices that underlie those numbers, they may not understand who should be held accountable. Finally, reporters should diversify their data sources. For example, in reporting on violence trends, many reporters turn to law enforcement or the courts. However, community organizations and public health agencies can often provide data and can include information on health and community impacts.

7. Expand sources to include underrepresented voices.

Across many public health and social justice issues from police violence to reproductive justice and more, the voices of people who are most directly affected tend to be included in the role of victim but underrepresented or absent as experts in community life and solutions. When selecting sources, consider

people beyond academic experts. Ask what communities are being harmed, what solutions they are already creating, and whether they have a voice in coverage. Seek to include the voices of those most impacted not just from isolated acts, but with a landscape view that might include how they are organizing with others to prevent these harms.

Consider these two examples:

- **Abortion:** Abortion providers and people who have abortions remain underrepresented in news coverage. Journalists must work to correct this imbalance. Hearing from the people whose lives are most directly affected can help to reduce stigma surrounding abortion care, as well as reflect and do justice to the breadth of experiences people have. To do so, journalists can go beyond national efforts and amplify the work of local and state-based organizations and individuals working on abortion rights, reproductive justice, and otherwise supporting people who access abortion care, e.g. through local abortion funds.

- **COVID:** People who have experienced COVID — and the communities that have been hit hardest — are crucial components of news stories. Newsrooms can create checklists, questions, and that explicitly seek to ensure that reporting is thorough, accurate, and balanced. For example, the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education offers trainings and tools that help bring conversations about racism and racial justice into the newsroom. Virtual reporter roundtable events can show how Black leaders are tackling the dual crises of COVID and racism and creating solutions. Early in the pandemic, one roundtable, *a Black-led COVID recovery,* connected reporters to Black leaders engaged in youth organizing for Black Lives and defunding the police in Vallejo, teachers dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, Black community development leaders working to stave off the next foreclosure crises in Richmond, bus drivers organizing to protect all residents and essential workers, Black entrepreneurs trying to keep locally-owned businesses led by Black residents afloat during the state of emergency, and formerly incarcerated people fighting to eliminate discrimination against inmates released during COVID.

8. Be transparent about your sources' background, particularly if they have ties to industry or other groups with a financial stake in a particular outcome.

Too often, to remain neutral, journalists produce stories that contain he said-she said reporting, giving equal weight to sources that have unequal social power. Although it is important to include multiple sources, it is just as important to help readers understand each source's connection to the issue and who stands to benefit — or be harmed. A prime example comes from the soda industry's ongoing attempts to block public health legislation to tax sugary drinks as part of a larger effort to reduce rates of diabetes, heart disease, and other nutrition-related issues. One common industry tactic is to fund opposition front groups that appear to be grassroots organizations. However, research from Berkeley Media Studies Group has repeatedly found that news coverage quoting members of these groups fails to report their financial ties to industry, giving the false impression of community-led opposition. To serve readers well, reporters must follow the money and bring financial transparency to their audiences.

9. Examine connections across issues and beats.

Doing so can help audiences see the bigger picture, including how the problem impacts communities' (physical and fiscal) health. Although mainstream news outlets traditionally divide coverage by beat, every issue has health implications, economic implications, environmental implications, etc. For example, research has found that mass shootings are often linked to misogyny and domestic violence. Elevating such connections can help the public and policymakers better envision ways to prevent harm. In the case of gun violence prevention, some jurisdictions have already developed lists that help to keep firearms out of the hands of known domestic abusers.

10. Be explicit about who is benefiting from (current and historical) structural racism and other forms of oppression that contribute to the issue disproportionately affecting other groups.

Many public health issues exist across all communities and cross racial, ethnic, and class lines. However, across almost every public health issue, data confirm that there are inequities based on racial, ethnic, class, gender and sexuality, immigration-status, disability status, and other aspects of our identity. As such, news stories need to reflect this. When investigating information about prevalence across different populations, keep in mind that many mainstream sources may not ask about or include those who are most harmed by these inequities in their research questions and methods. Talk with sources from organizations that represent the group that you are covering to get firsthand accounts when data are lacking (or to further support existing data).

Regarding reproductive health and rights, for example, low-income women and women of color are less likely to have access to affordable contraception, more likely to get abortions, and, thus, more heavily impacted by policies restricting the procedure. Coverage should make those inequities visible so that readers understand what is at stake for communities of color and working-class or high-poverty areas. Journalists should also help educate readers about the reproductive justice movement's history and framework. Women of color leaders in the 1990s pushed the field beyond pro-choice ideology (historically focused solely on abortion access) to approach reproductive rights as inextricably linked with race, class, and gender equity.