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Going to the Source

Following are some valuable professional guidelines for reporting on different races, multicultural groups, the disabled, different lifestyles, older adults and women. Even though the information in this chapter comes from the diverse groups themselves, remember always to ask the interviewee how he or she wants to be identified.

As a writer, photographer or artist, your job is to be aware of covering your community. In whichever state or city you work, urban or rural, you need to be aware of the different groups to whom you are writing as well as about whom you are writing. As a media professional, you will find it helpful to put together a diversity resource notebook of names and groups involved *in your community*. This will guide you in writing or portraying this special group.

The selected guidelines in this chapter are listed by groups in alphabetical order: The terms used are those suggested by the national journalists', media organizations and publicity offices of these special interest groups.

Covering African Americans/Blacks

1. *African American* or *black* is preferred. Sometimes, *people of color* is used. Ask the interviewee and those involved in the story how they want to be identified. The words *Negro*, *nigger* and *colored* are derogatory.
2. Consider stories that portray African Americans in all facets of life. Do blacks often appear in articles about crime, sports and entertainment but rarely in articles about business, politics or science? Write more follow-up stories after crimes involving black people. Describe how a star baseball player is volunteering for a local boys club, for example.
3. Avoid “Gee Whiz” stories about African Americans that show astonishment that blacks could accomplish whatever. A better approach is to consider stories about black people who have made it because they did all the things any other hardworking, motivated individual would do to get ahead.
4. Don’t limit stories about blacks to Black History Month or to an annual series on the anniversary of a riot.
5. Be specific when describing a black person. If the person is not American, specify the nationality. OK: He is an African. Better: He is a Ghanaian. OK: She is a West Indian. Better: She is Jamaican.
6. Avoid using *ghetto* to describe sections where minorities or the poor live. Specify the particular community—Harlem. Inner city is also used to label areas where there are large minority populations, leaving a negative perception.
7. No single person speaks for all black people. Continually meet and cultivate new sources.
8. Talk with African Americans in a variety of settings. Go to traditional meetings such as churches, but also drop in and talk to people in barber shops and the corner store.
9. In photos and graphics blacks are often shown in pain, crying, dancing, singing or shooting basketballs. Consider including blacks in art festivals, in classrooms, in hospital operating rooms and in libraries (Dalton, 1994; Featherstone, 1995; Irby, 1995; *News Watch*, 1994).

Covering Asian Americans

Asian Pacific Americans are a fast-growing ethnic minority in America; their numbers have more than doubled since 1970. Despite this growth, the news media’s knowledge about Asian Americans lags.

There are disturbing trends—rising anti-Asian violence, Japan-bashing, escalating racial tensions and stagnating affirmative action efforts. With these existing problems it is even more important for media to “get it right” when covering Asian Pacific Americans. There are several key problems that tend to mar news coverage of this group:

1. *Stereotypes* — One common stereotype of Asian Americans is the “model or super minority” myth. This says that Asian Americans are all successful, well-educated and immune from any of the social problems that affect other communities of color, such as poverty, drug abuse, lack of health coverage or civil rights violations. This pits Asian Americans against other minority groups.

Another spin on this myth is that “all Asians are alike,” ignoring the fact that people from 17 specific Asian groups and eight Pacific Islander groups live in the United States. Each group and each individual is different.

The flip side of the “model minority” myth is that Asian Americans are forever foreigners in the United States. They are portrayed as having funny accents and exotic customs. Or they are depicted as aggressive, war-hungry invaders taking over America. Two of the most powerful media images to emerge from the Los Angeles riots were the photographs of Uzi-toting Korean American merchants, guarding their shops, and of shopkeeper Soon Ja Du shooting a suspected black shoplifter.

2. *Loaded Words* — Asians are no longer called *Oriental*, but *Asian American* or specifically by their country or group. For example, Korean American, Chinese American, or Japanese American. Rugs are *oriental*.

Words such as *clever*, *inscrutable* or *shrewd*, though positive, can conjure up stereotypes of Asian Americans as mindless automatons. Terms like *China doll* and *dragon lady* belittle Asian American women, young and old, respectively. These terms are stereotypical and sexist.

3. *Loaded Images* — Cartoonists and artists should avoid depicting Asians with buck teeth, slanted eyes and/or big, round eyeglasses, such as was done in World War II propaganda images. The film industry’s Charlie Chan and Kung Fu images are just as offensive.

4. *Ethnic Slurs* — Words such as *Japs*, *Nips*, *Chinks*, *Chinaman*, *Gooks* and *Nippers* are racial slurs and should not be used. When a public official uses words such as these, get a reaction quote from a leader in the Asian American community.
5. *Media Insensitivity* — Asian Americans are frequently ignored by the news media as the subject of stories and as sources. Invisibility can be as dangerous as stereotypes and racial slurs. By ignoring Asian American stories and voices, the media perpetuate the belief that they are outside the mainstream of United States life and that their perspectives do not matter. Newspapers in communities with sizable Asian American populations should consider the community a beat.
6. *Military Metaphors* — Use caution when using military metaphors about Asian Pacific Americans and some international issues such as trade. Phrases such as *war*, *invasion* and *Pearl Harbor* are often used to portray Asian Americans as an invading force, again perpetuating the mistaken belief that they are outsiders taking over the country. The terms reinforce an “us versus them” attitude, which often serves to exacerbate racial tensions and hate crimes (ASNE, 1993; Moon, 1996; Nakamura, 1995; *News Watch*, 1994; *The Asian American Handbook*, 1991).

Covering People With Disabilities

The enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act has increased sensitivity about people with disabilities. Following are some considerations when covering people with disabilities:

1. Avoid pity stories. People with disabilities aren't helpless.
2. Don't always choose the angle of the super hero in the story. People with disabilities are just like everyone else except they live with some kind of disability. “Wow” stories are unconsciously insulting. These stories imply that doing something that is ordinary for most people is extraordinary for someone who has a disability, and this may not be so.
3. Use terms that focus on the people, not on the disability. For example, use *a person with cerebral palsy* rather than a *CP*; use *people who are deaf or hearing impaired* rather than *the deaf*.
4. Don't mention a person's disability unless it is relevant to the story.

5. Photographers should talk with the person with disabilities to obtain the subject's ideas about portrayal that is positive or neutral.
6. Be careful of terms used for those with disabilities: use *disabled* rather than *handicapped*. Handicapped comes from a time when social welfare consisted of those with disabilities begging on a street corner with their cap in their hand to catch the coins. Don't use: blind, deaf and dumb, crippled, she is a vegetable.
7. When interviewing a person with disabilities, allow plenty of time. Treat him or her as a person who has many qualities in addition to a disability. Learn what the person can do, and don't show amazement at his or her accomplishments.
8. Make direct eye contact with the interviewee and don't raise your voice unless asked to. Don't assume someone with a disability is hard of hearing or has other disabilities. Ask the person about issues that affect the disabled, which will lead you to many other stories (ASNE, 1993; ASNE, 1990).

Covering Gay-Related Stories

1. Gay people prefer to be called *gay*, not *homosexuals*. *Gay* has been the decided word for this community since 1969.
2. Inanimate objects do not have sexual orientation. For instance, a newspaper such as the *Washington Blade*, is not a homosexual newspaper, it is a newspaper for the gay community.
3. Openly gay people are not admitted homosexuals or known homosexuals. They are openly gay.
4. Homosexuals are not at high risk for AIDS. Lesbians are homosexual but are not at high risk for AIDS—in fact, they are at the very least risk. Sexually active gay men is a better term to identify this particular risk group.
5. Most social scientists today agree that sexual attraction is probably a product of both genetics and environment. A person does not grow up and then somewhere along the line simply choose to be attracted to a person of the opposite or of the same sex. Therefore, *sexual orientation* is a more accurate description than *sexual preference* when referring to the sexual attraction that motivates people.
6. Obituaries should reflect reality. A reporter does not verify a spouse to list them in a person's obituary; thus, a long-time partner

or companion should be treated in the same fair way (ASNE, 1993; Keen, 1987).

Covering Latinos/Hispanics

The term *Latino* describes those Spanish-speaking people who are from Latin America. The term *Hispanic* describes Spanish-speaking people. Many use the terms interchangeably, yet Mexican Americans, who make up a high percentage of the ethnic populations in the United States, are by definition *Hispanic*.

George Ramos is *The Los Angeles Times* Senior Writer for Latino Affairs and has spent years developing his skills in reporting Latinos or Hispanics. Ramos is the son of illegal immigrants from Mexico. His parents called themselves Mexican Americans, yet he calls himself Chicano and an American of Mexican descent. He says this is common for second-generation immigrants.

The Los Angeles Times has a 20 percent Latino readership. These incorporate Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorians, Argentines, Dominicans and so forth. Los Angeles, the community, has an approximately 46 percent Latino population.

Ramos says that each group and each individual must be studied so that misconceptions don't occur. He says that about 7 or 8 out of every 10 Mexicans are Democrats because their reason for coming to this country was economic betterment. Therefore, many of them are interested in social issues such as health, immigration laws, education and welfare.

In contrast, Ramos says many Cuban Americans are Republicans because they were the moneyed and business people who came to this country to escape political oppression. Many of them are wealthy and are interested in capitalism and international affairs, such as what is the United States going to do about Castro.

One striking example of stereotyping, says Ramos, is the image of the illegal immigrant. He says, "Close your eyes and visualize a picture of an illegal alien. What most people see is a small, dark individual, which equates to a Mexican or a South American. Yet, of the 4 million

illegals in this country, only about 40 percent are Latinos. The others are mostly on tourist visas and stayed illegally.”

Other Considerations When Covering Hispanics

1. Don't try to lump holidays together. Cinco de Mayo is a uniquely Mexican holiday, which is of little importance to Cubans or Salvadorians.
2. Even though the government uses the term *illegal alien*, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists has barred its usage. Many feel that such terms are pejorative, not only by those to whom they are applied but also to others of the same ethnic and national backgrounds who are in the United States legally. The recommended term is *illegal immigrants* or *undocumented immigrants*.
3. Long-time stereotypes of Mexicans should be avoided: the lazy worker needing his siesta; the Mexican driving his Chevy truck; the Frito Bandito image; the broken English responses such as “jes”; the colorful, hard-drinking people who party all the time and have many children because of their Catholic heritage. And remember, all Hispanics are not Mexican Americans.
4. The cheapest way for news agencies to avoid inaccurate and insensitive reporting is to hire bilingual and bicultural reporters and editors.
5. If you do not speak the language, use an interpreter.
6. Diversity is an essential news value that must be cultivated. It takes special effort on the part of the reporter to develop awareness to the various cultures within this culture. Covering the community means giving everyone an equal chance, which is the essence of fairness and balance (ASNE, 1993; Featherstone, 1995; Irby, 1995; Ramos, 1996; Takaki, 1993; ASNE, *The Multicultural Newsroom*, 1993).

Covering Native Americans/American Indians

1. Be careful of using and reinforcing stereotypes through such words as *warpath*, *warriors*, *scalping* or *savages*. This includes using Indians as “mascots.” This trivializes them as human beings and makes it easier to minimize the importance of Native American concerns.
2. Don't misuse Indian-derivative words such as *powwow*. To Native Americans a *powwow* is not just a meeting but a spiritual gathering with many cultural implications. Other words and phrases that have crept into common usage are *low man on the totem pole*, *wampum* and

squaw. This last word for a woman is particularly offensive because it is derived from an Algonquin language term for female genitalia.

3. Be careful when reporting on legal decisions. While the verbs *assigned* and *allowed* are used commonly, it is offensive to Native Americans to read about their rights being *allowed* when they were never legally relinquished. It is better to use verbs such as *upheld* treaty rights or *recognized* the authority of treaty agreements.
4. It is inaccurate to use the term American Indian when collectively referring to the aboriginal peoples of the United States, for it excludes some Alaska Native groups, including Inuit and Aleut peoples, who are not Indians. Use instead the name of the tribe being described.
5. Omission is strong in media coverage of Native Americans just as it is in covering other minorities and women. Native Americans should not always be reported on as museum pieces of a dying culture. They have ordinary lives as everyone else and are not always at the center of some treaty dispute with the government.
6. Be sensitive to holidays that are derogatory to Native Americans. They are not shown in a good light by Columbus Day, where the country celebrates its invasion by Europeans. And remember, Thanksgiving is a day of solemnity and sadness for many Native Americans.
7. Photographers should be aware of the visual images they give of Native Americans. They are not all victims of poverty and alcoholism. Some Native Americans resent seeing little children wearing colorful, feathered headbands, which to the Native American is a sacred token given only to those who have done exceptional deeds. Seeing the sports spectators giving the *tomahawk chop* is derogatory.
8. Quote tribal and community leaders. Don't always choose the government official as the primary source of tribal policy and information (ASNE, 1993; Featherstone, 1995; *News Watch*, 1994; Takaki, 1993; ASNE, *The Multicultural Newsroom*, 1993).

Covering Older Adults

1. The preferred terms to use are *older adults* or *mature adults*. Some do not like to be called seniors or senior citizens for to them it may sound like jargon, such as "gals" for "women."
2. When writing about older adults in news stories, just use their age:

"Jose Sanchez, 65, was a witness to the drive-by shooting."

Not:

“Senior citizen Jose Sanchez, 65, was a witness to the drive-by shooting.”

Labeling someone implies that his age has something to do with the story.

3. During an interview with an older adult, talk in a natural voice. All older adults are not hearing impaired. If they tell you they are, sit directly in front of them, talk slower and louder and enunciate your words carefully. Many people who are hard of hearing read lips to an extent. Older adults complain frequently that younger people talk too fast.
4. Do not be patronizing. Be respectful. Age does not naturally bring on senility. The interviewee may or may not have a better education than you do, and it's a given he or she has more life education than you do.
5. Be aware of issues of interest to mature adults. Many are on a limited income, and because of longer life span, worry that their money may run out before death. Many are terrified of crime and rightly so, and many have health problems, which brings up other issues such as transportation, insurance, medical choices, drug costs, family and friend support, and housing.
6. Be patient. Older adults may take longer to get around, to respond and to interview. One reason for this is the culture in which they were raised. Many come from a time when any visitor was offered refreshment, so you may have to be sociable before you get down to business. To gain confidence, you need to be sensitive to this.
7. Many older immigrant adults are mistrustful of outsiders, especially law enforcement, social workers or those in authority. Your community contact or a family member or friend may have to introduce you. Some of these immigrants have come from a country where they experienced executions, where neighbors turned in neighbors to the government, and where their survival depended on not telling everything they know.
8. Don't always portray older adults as victims. It has become a stereotype. Equally extreme is the marathon runner. Both of these images are at opposite ends of reality. Most older adults are doing ordinary things that everyone does.
9. Artists and photographers should portray older adults as they do younger adults. Avoid older adult stereotypes: victims in wheelchairs,

the “dirty old man” leering at a beautiful woman, the “crazy old woman” surrounded by her 15 cats.

10. Be aware of the fact that many older people are lonely and some are depressed because their friends are dying, and they experience more and more limitations.
11. Be aware that the young divulge information quite soon compared to older adults who were raised in an era when they were taught, “Don’t air your dirty laundry.”
12. Don’t liken older adults to children. Yet, the reality is that many older adults, because of health problems and limitations, are focused on their own daily needs (Cullen, 1996; Trask, 1998).

Covering Women

You may wonder why reporters must be sensitive about reporting on women when women are about 52 percent of the population and participate daily in business, government, education and so forth. Yet, the history of women in the United States demonstrates the paternalistic culture brought from Europe. Women had no legal rights and were owned by the male: the father, the husband or the brother protector. Women were not allowed to vote in national elections until 1920.

This history of exclusion has put women in a second-class position, where they are still stuck in some life issues. Sexist terms and attitudes are still rampant in this culture, and the reporter must be especially knowledgeable in not furthering sexism in news stories.

Three major sexist techniques occur with women, just as they do with minorities in mass media. They are omission, stereotypes and word choices. For example, women are in small numbers on front pages in bylines, or as newsmakers or experts. Nancy Woodhull, cochair of Women, Men and Media, says, “There is an act called symbolic annihilation. It means that if the press does not report your existence, for all perception purposes, you do not exist.”

Certainly, stereotypes still abound in advertisements, in photographs and in cartoons. From looking at these damaging images, it is obvious that women are sex objects, old crones, bimbos without intel-

ligence and certainly not anyone who has an expert opinion on an important subject.

Word usage about women has improved over the past two decades, but women are still described physically, their age has exaggerated importance because young is desirable and older women suffer from sexist terms as well as from ageist ones.

Guidelines When Writing About Women

1. Spread stories about women throughout every section. There should not be a "women's section" just as there should not be a "Hispanic section."
2. Put important women's concerns, such as day care, sexual harassment, Title IX, inequities and unequal pay, on the front page.
3. Make a list of women who are experts in nontraditional fields and call on them for quotes: engineering, economics, medicine and so forth.
4. Cover women's sports.
5. Identify women by their own activities, not as wife of, mother of or daughter of some male.
6. Avoid adjectives such as *petite*, *feisty*, *pushy* or *coy*.
7. Keep a file of female sources for stories that directly affect women, such as breast cancer, abortion and fetal tissue research. Quote women who are experts in these areas. Quote women's organizations on these issues.
8. Women's groups are just as diverse as any others. Don't let one group speak for all women. Women of color and white women have common issues, yet they have great differences in other areas. Be sure women of color and white women are quoted.
9. Photographers, cartoonists and graphic artists should be overly sensitive to the objectionable images of women. When men and women are photographed, place them in equal positions. Women should appear on the front pages. Too many times, media publish or tape the stereotypical image of the old bag lady pushing a shopping cart or the celebrity woman, such as the First Lady, with her mouth open (ASNE, 1993; Featherstone, 1995; Gerhardt, 1995; *Image of Women in Television*, 1974; Moon, 1996; Thomas, 1995).

AN INTERVIEW WITH AN AIDS REPORTER

Joyce Mitchell, a California AIDS reporter and independent television producer, has become an expert because of her professional and personal work with people with AIDS. She has 25 years' television experience and is an Emmy award-winning producer. Mitchell says that when working at KCRA in Sacramento in 1986, she was assigned as AIDS Lifeline producer to generate an AIDS story a week. She said she began seeing babies and teenagers and women with AIDS and realized that the token AIDS story was barely touching the surface of a much larger health story in society. Through these interview experiences, she says she realized that the "main mission of media is to educate people about this problem."

"The largest growing group of people with AIDS falls within the injection drug use population," says Mitchell. "They can no longer be ignored."

These injection drug users are predominantly male and are spreading the infection to women and children. There are underground needle exchange groups in many communities who are working outside the law to try to slow the spread of HIV. They teach the injection drug users how to clean their drugs and exchange their needles. In many states, needle exchange is illegal.

Mitchell says she has worked with these groups because the story had to be told. She broke the underground needle exchange story on ABC in 1994. She says she has an attorney standing by in case she may ever need one, yet the law tends to look the other way.

Access Sacramento sponsors a User Friendly program on cable that is shown every Friday night at 11 p.m. and is aimed at the injection drug users. It is the only show of its kind. Mitchell says this was aired in New York on cable but failed eventually for lack of support. She says she is producing the programs from a small grant from a university. She freelances independent shows for public television also and for ABC News.

Joyce Mitchell says, "It's a whole new world of reporting happening right now, and there is a huge concern for society. Our young people are at risk. The newest rising numbers in the population with AIDS are people between the ages of 20 and 28 years. That means that they were most likely infected when they were teenagers. We're not doing a good enough job of education."

Media are not doing their part, according to Mitchell. "My biggest frustration is getting people to listen."

AN INTERVIEW WITH AN AIDS REPORTER (continued)

She says that she has had bosses yell at her, "No more AIDS stories." Media journalists and news directors seem to think this is an old story, particularly in light of the decline in deaths. This is due in part to the triple drug therapies keeping people alive longer. Yet, hepatitis C is also rampant. Hepatitis C is transmitted the same way as HIV. It is a new HIV problem for which there is no cure. Mitchell says that 96 percent of drug users in Sacramento test positive to hepatitis C, and the majority of all drug users now test positive. She says it is easier to get than HIV.

"Another area that society must address related to HIV is money because it costs the community \$15,000 a year per person to pay for the triple drug therapies. The costs are prohibitive and each community has that burden. Some kind of regulation will have to be addressed in the future," says Mitchell.

Joyce Mitchell is one individual who is doing her part. From the professional who was assigned the topic in the 1980s to the totally immersed media professional and volunteer today, she puts her message on the line: "Television is the best educational tool. The AIDS story must be revisited at regular intervals" (Mitchell, 1998).

Covering HIV and AIDS

Those suffering from AIDS in our country are shunned just as lepers have been throughout the centuries. The spread of the disease has slowed in the few years since it has been identified, yet prejudice and pain have grown around the problems associated with the families, the health care and the workplaces of these individuals.

Even medical professionals discriminate, and society does nothing to stop this. In an article in the *Boston Globe* (December 26, 1994), Belinda Dunn says she saw five doctors before she found one who was willing to give her a complete examination and felt comfortable enough to look her in the eye. Dunn has AIDS.

In April 1994, a United States District Court in Illinois ordered a physician to treat a Los Angeles man who had been denied a little-known, alternative medicine for hepatitis B because he was infected with HIV. And in the fall of that same year, a federal jury in Ohio

awarded \$512,000 in damages to the estate of a patient who was refused treatment at a hospital because he had AIDS.

Because of the prejudice associated with AIDS, reporters must be careful in protecting people's privacy and in gathering the facts carefully and accurately about the disease.

Guidelines When Writing About HIV/AIDS

1. Educate yourself on what HIV/AIDS is. There are many health information and support groups that will talk with you or send you materials. Use the most updated information. Start with: www.ama-assn.org and www.aegis.com/topics
2. Protect your individual sources and use pseudonyms if they request this. There is still extreme prejudice and ignorance about the condition. Consider how society dealt with leprosy in the past; this is a similar situation.
3. Most larger communities have hospices, foundations and home care support for people with AIDS. As a reporter, visit and talk with patients, volunteers and medical personnel. Get permission from persons with AIDS to interview them or from whomever has their power of attorney. Always get permission in writing.
4. Use the individual to tell your story. If you can get the readers to identify with the people involved, you can touch them with the information. Anecdotes and scenarios are effective. In the last stages, people with AIDS may not be talking. Describe the conditions and surroundings and interview the caretakers.
5. In each article you write, tell the message of how HIV is spread and how to avoid the infection.
6. Use current health statistics to dispel the myth that only gay men have HIV/AIDS.
7. Publish community resources so the public can contact them for information.
8. Don't limit your research to accepted AMA information; contact underground groups for alternate treatments not accepted by the FDA. The government takes a long time in giving approval, which in most cases is to our advantage; yet those who are dying of AIDS are making themselves guinea pigs for future breakthroughs. This should be reported also.

9. Be cautious about terms used. HIV virus is redundant. The V stands for virus. Don't use "AIDS patient" but a "person with AIDS" or PWA because not all people with AIDS are patients. The old term "IV drug user" has been replaced with "injection drug user" because many don't inject in their veins; they do what they call "skin popping" (Keen, 1987; Mitchell, 1998).

