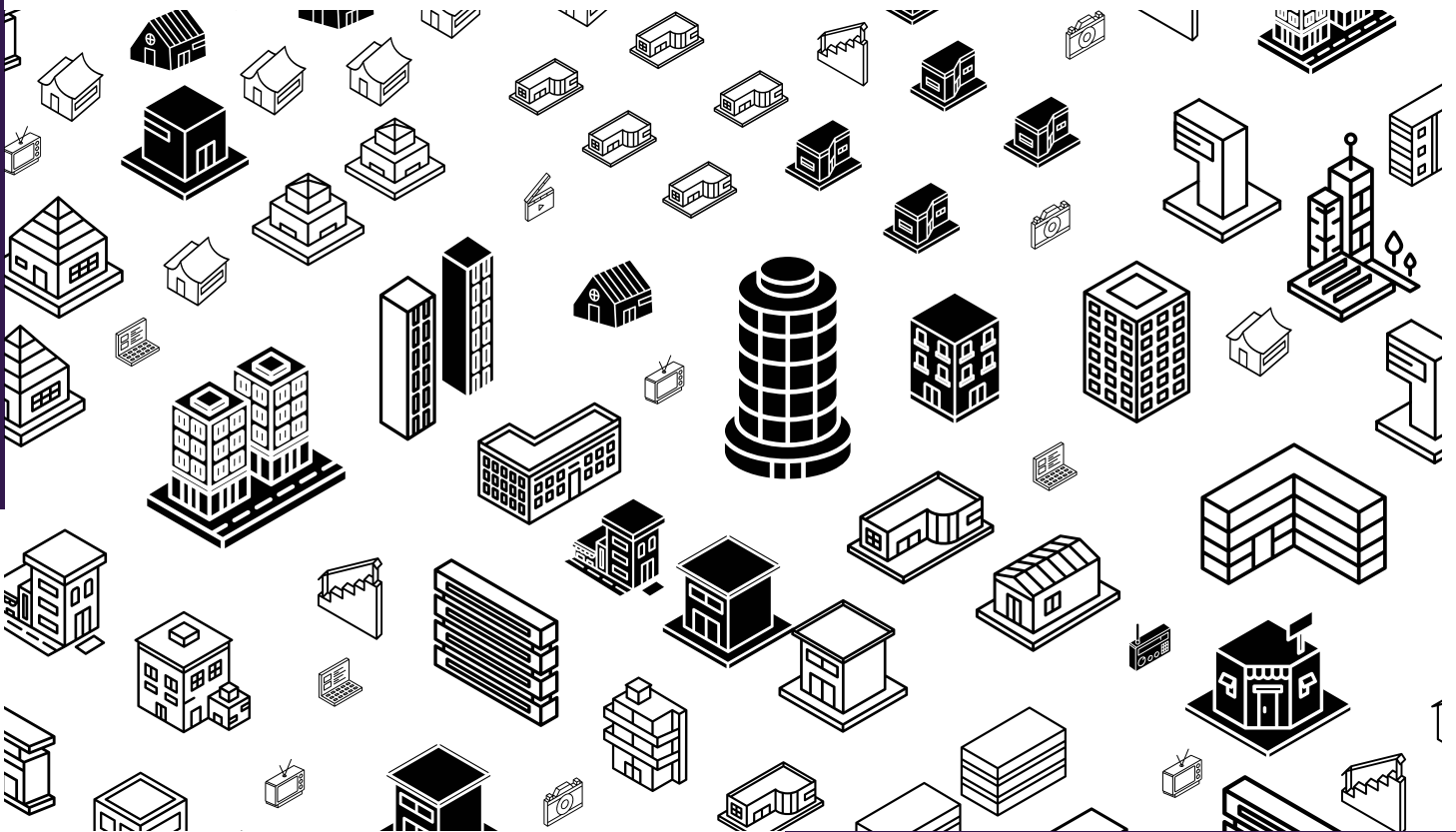


Empowerment Journalism Guide

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Global Reporting
Centre



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Who is this guide for?

Our purpose in creating the Empowerment Journalism Guide is to share knowledge, advice, and best practices for producing “community-engaged reporting” – in our case, a type of reporting we have termed “empowerment journalism.” We created this guide for journalists, editors, producers, non-fiction authors, filmmakers, storytellers, and anyone interested in learning more about best practices for working with and in communities.

This is not a typical how-to guide. There is no checklist or comprehensive approach to empowerment reporting – we encourage you to simply take what you find useful.

This guide is produced by the Global Reporting Centre, an editorially independent and not-for-profit newsroom based at the University of British Columbia’s School of Journalism, Writing, and Media. We were founded in 2016 with the goal of challenging the way global journalism is done. [Learn more about how we work.](#)

Preface

We’d like to start this guide with a short introduction reflecting on who gets to tell stories, and the language we use to describe what it is that we (journalists) do.

Who are the storytellers?

There is increasing discussion around the role and power dynamics of journalists as storytellers.

At the GRC, our work on this topic is greatly influenced by our former University of British Columbia colleague (now an associate professor at Carleton University) [Duncan McCue](#).

His work on reporting in Indigenous communities ([online toolkit](#), journalism graduate course, and now a published textbook, [Decolonizing Journalism](#)) offers practical guidance to journalists looking to report in ways that: address historical, current, and colonial power imbalances; embrace nuance and complexity in reporting; break down long-standing stereotypes; understand and recognize the significance of cultural and community protocols; address the lack of coverage, and more.

Duncan McCue’s work around “story-taking” also asks journalists to reflect on their role in extractive storytelling. We encourage you to read the textbook, but in short, McCue says:

There's a long history of non-Indigenous people coming to Indigenous communities, asking about people's lives, requesting their stories, then *leaving*.¹ Those visitors interpreted what they saw and heard—in books, reports, studies, films, or photos. Indigenous people had little say in how those stories were told; in many cases, the story never even made it back to them. ...You are the latest in a long-line of storytellers requesting permission to portray Indigenous Peoples to the world. If you are calling, or going to meet, an Indigenous person for an interview for the first time, that Indigenous person may have an image of *you*² in their head. You may be a story-taker—someone who is going to take their story away. And, if history is a guide, there's a good chance that a) that Indigenous person is correct, and b) you're going to get the story wrong. (Duncan McCue, *Decolonizing Journalism*, Page 4)

With this in mind, you might want to start your reporting work by asking yourself some key questions:

1. Why are *you* telling this story?
2. Who is the story for?
3. Why tell *this* story?

A term by any other name

These are not new questions. Journalists, scholars, and media organizations have been grappling with them for a long time. And in response, what has sprung up is a myriad of reporting approaches that attempt to do things a little differently.

We'd like to start with empowerment journalism, since that is the foundation for this guide. The term, coined in 2016 by the Global Reporting Centre's founder and former executive director Peter Klein, is presented as a counter to "parachute" journalism – the practice of dipping in and out of countries, communities, and contexts that are not your own and taking stories away for audiences "back home." This practice is heavily criticized, but still very much practiced in global journalism. But the story doesn't necessarily have to be global. Reporters can become parachute journalists in any community or context that is unfamiliar – whether half a world or half a block away.

In contrast, empowerment journalism is about co-creation and partnership – whether that's through training and mentorship, including non-journalist storytellers in our reporting, media literacy and ongoing consent, editorial input and crediting, or community engagement and

1 Emphasis in original.

2 Emphasis in original.

reciprocity.

It is also about challenging the fixer-foreign correspondent model³ by working with local journalists in the field, while ensuring fair and equitable crediting, editorial input, and payment. The GRC has drafted recommendations for best practices (read here) for the journalist-fixer relationship.

We'd like to be clear that empowerment journalism is the term we use. And it's not perfect.

Emily Kasriel, former BBC editor and author of the upcoming book *Deep Listening* for Harper Collins, told us, “the term empowerment which I used to use, and then I don't know if it was pointed out, but it was kind of controversial... somebody told me actually it's a term they avoid because of the subject/object inherent in it, even though I know that's not what you mean and what you want to do is completely the opposite and that you want to involve the subjects of the story as full contributing agents to the creation of that story.”

There are many other journalists, filmmakers, producers, etc., doing similar work under different names: engagement reporting, community-engaged reporting, community collaboration, participatory journalism, solutions journalism, and more.

And many are doing the work without a specific label, but with similar foundational principles and ethics.

Steve Rosenbaum, talking about his work with MTV's *Unfiltered* (a series where viewers could record their own stories) said, “people want to tell their stories, and people have a story to tell. And our job was to facilitate them telling their story their way – not to presume what we thought their story was, and then try and get soundbites to fit into it... We're not the journalists in this. We're the facilitators.”

We all have a lot to learn from those working to try different approaches to create models of journalism that are grounded in equity, accuracy, and reciprocity. For this guide we interviewed 21 industry professionals. You'll learn about their work throughout this guide, along with their tips, advice, and lessons learned.

How to use this guide

Before we get started, we want to be clear this is not a how-to guide. There is no checklist,

³ A fixer is a local person, often a journalist, hired to assist a non-local journalist or team with reporting, logistics, translation, safety, security, etc. during field work. To learn more about the challenges with the fixer-foreign correspondent model, you can read Peter Klein and Shayna Plaut's article, [“Fixing” the Journalist-Fixer Relationship](#).

one-size fits all model, or comprehensive approach to this type of reporting. What this guide does offer is a series of suggestions, helpful tools/tips, advice, and lessons learned from journalists, filmmakers, and media organizations – all of whom are experimenting with their reporting approaches.

If you're the metaphor type of person, think about this guide more like a buffet than a ten-course meal – take the parts that work for you and your reporting, and leave the rest. We encourage you to come back and revisit it – what you'll hopefully come away with is a set of tools for different ways to engage with the communities you are reporting in and the people you are reporting about.

Key Questions

Is Empowerment Journalism the approach for you and your work?

When looking to answer the question: “Should I use empowerment journalism in my work?” we encourage you to say, “yes!” every time. In this guide, there are universally applicable journalistic principles like relationship and trust building, power dynamics, and reporting ethically in communities. But we acknowledge that there are some suggestions that may not work for a variety of reasons: timelines/deadlines, resources, newsroom policies, among others. So with this in mind, we suggest you consider the following questions and how they can inform your approach.

Who is the story for? And why tell this story?

To incorporate empowerment journalism into your reporting, start by asking yourself some questions. Are you from the community at the centre of the story? Have you already built community connections? If you are answering no, there are a number of steps outlined in this guide to help you incorporate an empowerment approach.

Remember the point made by Duncan McCue highlighting the difference between storytelling and story-taking? By asking yourself who this story is for, and how it serves the communities you are reporting in, you can hopefully avoid extractive storytelling.

Alex Pritz directed [*The Territory*](#), a documentary partially filmed by members of the Uru-eu-wau-wau community in Brazil who are featured in the film.

Pritz told us, “starting out, we didn’t come at it and say, ‘Okay, we’re going to do a co-production and do all these different things,’ it was really just like, ‘Okay, if we want to talk to this community about making a film together or including their

perspective in a film, we have a lot of work we need to do to explain what a film is and how a film operates and how it's made and what the purpose of it is.'

...We brought cameras down and showed people how to operate cameras, how to work in front of them, how to work behind them. 'If we're going to work together, it's eight hours a day that we might be all up in your business, following you, doing everything you do.'

...And at the same time, they said, 'If we're going to work on this, don't just follow us.' They had this journalism fatigue and they said, 'All these reporters come and they spend two weeks with us and we show them deforestation and we take them around, they do the interviews with the elders and nothing changes for us. It's actually a huge energy sap to be chaperoning these people, to do all this work and then not really see anything from it.'

So, how can you better serve the community you are reporting in? This can be a challenging question for global and national outlets who have a broader audience. This is why we suggest asking a simple question to your interviewees: *Why are you sharing with me today?* Remember people are choosing to commit their time, effort, and energy to speak with you for a variety of reasons. Knowing what those reasons are can help you to consider the impact of your reporting.

Filmmaker [Alejandro Yoshizawa](#) told us, "interviewing is not easy. Being interviewed is not easy. So that's the number one thing. So you don't take for granted that someone has donated their time...you have to respect their time. You have to respect their story. You obviously have to be prepared, but you also have to be prepared to listen."

Investigations have spurred activism, triggered elections, and led to policy changes. We've seen heads of state resign and arrests of high-ranking officials, but there are also community-level impacts.

[Meaghan Brackenbury](#), formerly with Cabin Radio and now at CBC North in Yellowknife, said, "I always tend to approach sources as people first and sources second. I think that's really important because I think a lot of times when we're reporting on issues that revolve around people's personal stories and experiences, we tend to forget that nobody actually owes us that as journalists and storytellers... it's actually a real act of generosity for them to share their story with you."

How do you build relationships and trust?

Building trust and lasting relationships within communities can be difficult. It is your job to hold people in power accountable, and to report stories that, while accurate, may not always be favourable. Sometimes there is also a legacy of bad reporting. Misrepresentations and inaccuracies in media narratives – especially in communities that are historically under-represented – may spark distrust of journalists.

And you are likely not the first journalist to come into a community, so you carry the legacy of past wrongdoings. This means you need to put in the work to build trust.

Speaking about the film, [*All Our Father's Relations*](#), director Alejandro Yoshizawa said that before the film aired on CBC, “we did a special screening, before the film was done of course, with a rough cut version with Musqueam Treaty people because they’re very vigilant about how Musqueam history is represented in the media, and I think rightfully so.”

Even if you are a member of the community, it can be difficult to navigate the role of insider-reporter. Whatever your positionality, establishing yourself as a trusted person who can accurately report the information shared with you can take time.

When talking about his series ‘[Who’s Afraid of Aymann Ismail?](#)’, Slate’s Aymann Ismail told us, “my approach was to ask questions that I didn’t already have the answer to. That was going to be my bar, because as a Muslim American and doing a story about Muslim Americans, I came through it with a lot of assumptions, where I thought I knew what my community was about, because these questions I thought were about me. And so I needed to look and interrogate my own feelings and my own relationship with this community and ask questions that I was genuinely curious about so that I can learn something in the process.”

Practical Advice

Here’s how you can incorporate empowerment journalism into your work. This is advice, lessons learned, and best practices. If you skipped the preamble, just a reminder here that this is not a one-size-fits-all model. Take what works for you and leave what doesn’t.

Trust

When using an empowerment journalism approach, trust is the number one pillar. Here are some ways that you can build trust and relationships within the communities you are reporting in:

Start with one story. When you are reporting in a community where you have little to no connections, start with a single well-reported story. And then come back.

Emilee Gilpin, Senior Communications Advisor and Community Storyteller for Coastal First Nations, was a reporter and special advisor for Canada's National Observer's 'First Nations Forward' series. She said, "a lot of it was based on relationships...I would go and show up and do the story and if I did it in a good way I would often be invited back and I just built that network from the ground up."

Do your homework. There are a lot of valid critiques about the harms of "parachute journalism." Parachuting into a location, community, or story, without research, pre-reporting, building trust, or making connections (both professional and community-level) can be harmful, and can reinforce a legacy of harmful practices. Even if you are on a tight deadline, do as much pre-reporting as you can. If your deadline is same-day, or in some cases even quicker, consider filing and then following up with community members to continue building a foundation. This may also lead to more stories in the future.

Ask questions. Beyond your interview questions, have a conversation with your sources about why they are speaking with you.

Talking about Dementia Diaries, a UK audio/video project, creator Paul Myles said, "we start off the project saying, 'This is your project. What is it about dementia that you really want to get across? What really pisses you off when you read about it in the media? What are the stereotypes? What should this project be about?'"

Don't always call because you want something. Spend time getting to know the community you are working in. Talk to people. Attend community meetings/gatherings that are open to the public (or with permission). Show up at city hall meetings – even if you aren't on assignment. Build connections and relationships so when you start working on a story, you have a foundation of trust and a built-in network. It is also a way to show the community that you care deeply about the issues, questions, and concerns they are facing.

Respect community/cultural protocols. This is an extension of "do your homework." Learn and follow protocols throughout your reporting to ensure that your work is respectful and ethical – if you are unsure what they are, ask. Also, don't assume that protocols are standard across all communities. And don't assume that protocols are locked in time – things may change from one reporting trip to the next and it is your job to ensure that you are up-to-date.

Emilee Gilpin told us, "I would make sure to ask about place-based or Nation-based protocols throughout the process. I would ask people I interviewed how I could respect their culture and protocols in the engagement, as each person or community

may have different notions of that. Some people would need to have certain voices included, whether a hereditary, traditional, elected leader, or would need to have certain permissions to share certain kinds of information.”

Partnerships and Collaborations

Build a team. If you don’t have prior community connections, consider partnering with or hiring local reporters to your project. Working collaboratively with journalists from within communities will build trust and ensure a deeper knowledge of local context.

Amy Standen of the California-based prison podcast *Ear Hustle* said, “our whole editorial process – which stories we tell, whom we interview and what about, how the story is edited and narrated – is informed by conversations with our colleagues inside prison, as well as formerly incarcerated people.”

“Having an editorial team that includes people with the same lived experience that we are reporting on makes our stories not just deeper and more nuanced, but very often funnier, more poignant or surprising.”

“There are things that come up in an interview that I hear differently than our currently and formerly incarcerated guys do. They ask questions I wouldn’t – and vice versa – and our interviews take unexpected turns.”

Embed in a community. If you (your newsroom, your production, etc.) have the resources and ability, consider embedding within a community. Living in the community you are reporting in serves to deepen your reporting, help you gain contextual knowledge, and build trust. You may learn things, witness events, and meet people you wouldn’t have otherwise had the opportunity to.

Decide who on your reporting team has editorial input. This should be communicated at the start of a project. For example, is someone a translator or a field producer? One may have editorial input while the other may not. Consider your team and each person’s role, and make it clear what level of editorial input you are expecting – will they help decide who to interview? What questions to ask? How to frame the story? What story to pursue? Will they be asked to review drafts ahead of publication? Where possible, we encourage you to seek editorial input from your team – when it comes to community-engaged journalism, collaboration makes the work stronger.

Britney Dennison, the executive editor at the Vancouver-based Global Reporting Centre and producer of the documentary series ‘*Turning Points*’ said, “each film in the series was co-produced by the story subjects. Storytellers are credited as directors and writers. Throughout the production we sought feedback, guidance, and direction from storytellers. For example, the production team edited each

film and then reviewed cuts for feedback and changes. Sometimes they asked for substantial changes in direction, which meant re-shooting interviews and scenes. I feel like this approach brought a depth and nuance to the films that may have otherwise been lost.”

Decide what level of editorial input your sources might have. For empowerment journalism, the Global Reporting Centre includes sources as part of the team. They receive credit on projects, and provide feedback and input from reporting all the way up to publication. For community-engaged journalism, and documentary productions, this might look like sharing stories with sources ahead of publication (for feedback, accuracy, and accountability). This may also include acknowledgement in the credits. If you are opening up editorial input in this way, we advise that you:

- Lay out expectations in writing at the start of a project
- Create a set of ethical guidelines to ensure your commitment to journalism standards and principles
- Consider payment to sources if they are credited and working on the project in a similar capacity to your reporting/project team
- Be transparent with your audience

Speaking about the film *Healing Nation*, director Jamuna Galay-Tamang said, “it was important to me to have [one of the film’s main subjects] receive the credit that she deserved for making it possible to do the film... None of it would’ve happened without her.”

Galay-Tamang said when sharing edits of the film with this person, “we had different goals. Her goal was to have a platform to share her full story. My goal was to create a film that amplified certain themes that a lot of people share. She wanted to get more details of her story into the film. I thought the details would bog down the storytelling. So it was a little bit of a clash with that. It was really difficult. It was really difficult, but I would still want to do it again.

Pamela Yates directed *The Resistance Saga*, a documentary trilogy that collaborated with Mayan Indigenous leaders in Guatemala over a span of 35 years. While making the trilogy’s first film, 1982’s *When the Mountains Tremble*, Yates told us,

“when we came back after six months of filming, we had a lot of really great

scenes, but nothing to hold them together. Someone who knew we were making this film, brought a young Guatemala Mayan woman. She was 22 years old and living in exile. Her name was Rigoberta Menchú Tum...when Rigoberta came, we invited her to come into the editing room and look at the sequences that we had put together. She decided that she would write her own story, and we could use it as a segue to tie all the pieces together.”

Consider an Advisory Board. Forming an advisory board composed of key stakeholders is one way of building accountability into your reporting/projects. Board members can include community members, subject-matter experts, advocates, etc. If you do take this route, make sure to establish clear ethical and editorial boundaries. Create documentation that lays out roles and responsibilities, expectations, accountability, and governance. This will also need to be cleared with the entire reporting team, including editors and potentially newsroom leadership to ensure that it doesn't conflict with company-wide policies.

Discuss copyright and data ownership/sharing. Consider ways that you might share data (photos, footage, etc.), ownership, copyright, or licensing with interviewees. This will be a larger conversation with your newsroom, production company, etc., but sharing data can be an important tool for giving back to a community. One low-barrier method might be to consider a creative commons licence. In other cases you might offer licences to interviewees so they can use assets gathered for their own purposes – for example photos taken (and not just the ones used in the story). In other cases, like with empowerment journalism, you may want to consider sharing copyright and ownership.

Olivia Leigh Nowak is a documentary filmmaker. She explained that for the Salmon Stories project, a series of short films on the importance of salmon in the Pacific Northwest, “our release form, the way that it was set up, was that the storyteller has the rights to their own story...so the release form was clear, ‘You have ownership, but we have the rights to share it. But whatever it is that you feel uncomfortable with, or if there’s something that was said throughout that that has changed, you have the right to ask us to remove that story.’”

Be clear and transparent about who is getting paid and how much. Payment should always be discussed with your reporting/project team up front. There should be a clear, agreed-upon amount, and a detailed payment schedule. If someone's job duties expand over the course of the project, payment should be re-negotiated – nobody should be asked to do work that is above and beyond their negotiated contract. You may consider paying people beyond your traditional project team, like sources, advisors, elders, etc. this may take the form of honoraria or payment for work.

Traditional newsroom ethics generally do not allow for payment to sources, so if you are choosing to, these decisions should be made with your full editorial team, and ethical

frameworks should be put in place to ensure that it doesn't impact the accuracy and editorial independence of your work. If payments are made to sources, the process should be transparent to the audience.

Christopher Cheung, a Vancouver-based staff reporter at [The Tyee](#), said, "small things like offering somebody a coffee or even a meal for their time, I think that's fine. One unique example is when I interviewed somebody who is homeless about their life during COVID, and he shared with me tons of photos that he took, and they were all really good. In the past, he had worked for *The Georgia Straight* [a local newspaper]. So he is somebody with newsroom experience, and I felt guilty about running not one but multiple images from a professional without some form of compensation. I checked in with my editor, and we decided to pay him for use of the images. Because he does not have a bank account, we took the extra step of paying him in cash, which we usually do not do. Our rationale was that this was not buying access or an interview, which we wouldn't do, but that this was paying him like any other contributor for use of their photography."

Provide mentorship and training opportunities. Mentoring and training is another way to infuse more reciprocal processes into your journalism. Whether it is mentorship and training within your reporting team, or more empowerment journalism approaches, providing learning opportunities for your interviewees. It is another way to share what you know.

[Sandy Storyline](#) was a collaborative project where community members affected by Hurricane Sandy could contribute stories. Co-director Rachel Falcone said, "we did a lot of different things because it was kind of an experiment. So, we did writing workshops at local libraries, like the New York Public Library branch in Staten island, and a semester-long youth program in Coney Island. All people can tell a story, but you need to make it a welcoming environment where they feel like they have the tools to participate fully."

Consent (Informed and Ongoing)

Informed consent is a key principle of journalism. If someone is going on the record as a source, it's the reporter's job to make sure they understand the possible legal, professional, and personal consequences they may face as a result of speaking out publicly.

"That's one thing that's really, really important with the undocumented community or with someone that is undocumented: allowing them the space to say no. And allowing them to have an informed decision of if they want to participate in a story or not," said Juan Pablo Garnham, a former reporter for the

Texas Tribune, and the communication and policy engagement manager at the [Eviction Lab](#) – a Princeton-based organization that publishes nationwide eviction data.

Check in early and often. Consent is not a single event – it needs to be ongoing. A person’s initial consent might not be based on a full understanding of what the project will entail. This could be things like the project taking up more time than expected, or the direction of the story changing as it’s reported. It’s important to reaffirm participation as production moves along and respect a participant’s decision to change their mind. (This advice applies predominately to community members and not to government, public officials, community leaders, etc.)

While working at [City Bureau](#), a Chicago-based local journalism lab, Alejandra Cancino said, “if it’s a person that has never dealt with the media, they may not understand the impacts or the ramifications of speaking in a story...Then it is important for me to go above and beyond to explain to that person, ‘here is what the story is going to say. Here is what it might look like. Here is what the tweet is going to say. And here’s how it might impact you in your daily life.’”

Crediting

Part of being transparent is ensuring that everyone is appropriately credited for work on a story/project. There is an effort these days to [ensure more equitable crediting](#), but there is still work to be done. When it comes to community-engaged journalism or empowerment journalism, crediting may also extend beyond your reporting team and include acknowledgements to those from the community who helped you find, shape, create the story.

It is important to have these conversations early and often. It is everyone’s job to ensure transparency: media organizations, reporters, editors, etc. You must communicate effectively so everyone knows:

- What their job is
- How much credit they will receive
- What kind of editorial input they will have
- How much, how often, and when they will be paid
- Anything else that is needed to communicate a fair and equitable working environment

Credit contributors. If someone contributed to your project or story, give them credit. Discuss with your team and editors ahead of time what type of crediting language to use and how

prominent it will be within the story. If you are using an empowerment approach, consider how you might provide credit in a story: do they have an editorial role? A special thanks? An advisory role? And so on. By opening up credits it not only ensures that people receive appropriate recognition for their work, it also promotes transparency with your audience

When the pandemic hit during production, said *The Territory* director Alex Pritz, none of the foreign crew were allowed in Uru-eu-wau-wau territory. “So we said, ‘Okay, of course we respect that. We want to figure out how we could keep filming, this feels like an important part of your story. How do you guys think we can do that?’ They said, ‘Send us more cameras, send us better cameras, send us professional audio equipment, we can handle it.’

We did contactless drops. We would bring sanitized cameras to the edge of the territory, they would come, pick it up, and return with hard drives of footage they’d shot. And we did that for a full year. We didn’t enter their territory while they shot, produced, and managed footage for all this stuff – major parts of the film.

And so with them taking on all this producing work, we said, ‘Okay, let’s push this even further and not just have it be creatively participatory, but let’s treat you guys the way we would any other production company that would be on this film... they became part of the back end of the film equal to any other production company we were working with – same exact terms. The idea of ownership was a super important part of it.’

Put it in writing. Provide clear documentation at the start of a project. This should outline how and when a contributor, community member etc. will be credited. Use specific language and agree on the crediting ahead of time (this means titling, links out, position of the credit in the story (byline vs. end-credit etc.)). This helps ensure transparency and informed consent. This may seem like a straight-forward piece of advice, but often it doesn’t happen, or it happens too late. Written documentation helps to ensure that agreements are not just promises, but are formal obligations.

Accessibility and Accountability

Ensuring that a published work is accessible to the community, local team, and everyone you spoke with should happen throughout the reporting process. What we want to avoid is the default thinking that because stories often live online, that means that they are inherently accessible – that is not always the case. Think through how accessible your story is in terms of language, internet access, literacy, etc. (and not just to the people who you spoke to or worked with, but also to the communities you worked in).

Find creative ways to report, record, and publish. Think about all the ways a story can be shared. Are there different formats or avenues that are more accessible within a community? If you produced a documentary, could you host a community screening? If a particular social media platform is popular in a community, could you prioritize that platform for sharing? There are countless ways to repackage stories to make them more accessible – it’s just about getting creative.

[Christopher Cheung](#) said, “during the pandemic in Vancouver’s low-income Downtown Eastside, online news magazine The Tyee published a selection of stories related to the neighbourhood in [a printed newsletter format](#). The newsletter was distributed throughout lobbies in the neighbourhood and was designed with larger text to ensure that it was easy to read. To this day, it’s not uncommon to see residents of the neighbourhood print out stories on their own and tape them to lampposts for others to [read](#).”

Consider building additional resources. Increasingly, newsrooms and editorial staff are developing additional resources around their stories. This can take many forms, like teaching guides ([PBS NewsHour’s Lesson Plans](#) for educators), public talks (especially within communities and accessible to communities), behind-the-scenes (PBS FRONTLINE has an [entire podcast](#) dedicated to telling the story behind the story), and community forums for feedback and discussion. These are just a few examples of how you might consider creating a full suite of content around your project/story.

Yukari Kane is a founder of the [Prison Journalism Project](#), which trains incarcerated writers in journalism and publishes their stories across the U.S. Kane said, “when we edit stories, we always keep an eye out for areas where we could create a handout to help our writers strengthen their craft. We’re trying to support the development of journalists. We don’t want to lower our standards, we want to help them get there.”

Consider translations. Your work might be published in a language other than the one that your interviewees speak. If they do not speak/read in the language of the final published piece, consider ways of translating and sharing the work.

- Where possible, and if resources allow, news outlets can consider translating the full project. If that is not possible, consider building in time after publication with translators from your project to verbally share the story back to sources.
- Ensure that any written forms and documentation, like release forms, are fully translated into the local language – especially if you are requesting signatures.
- Where possible use text-on-screen instead of voice-over to privilege the language and voices of your interviewees.

Meet people where they're at. This goes for all aspects of your reporting. Ask people about their experience with the media. Depending on their answer, this may mean that you need to provide additional context about why you are speaking with them and what will come from that conversation. Ask people how much time they have. Ask if there is a particular communication method that they prefer. Basically, shift your expectations and approach for each person you interview.

While speaking about City Bureau's [*The People's Guide to Community Benefits Agreements and Alternatives*](#), Sarah Conway said, "instead of doing a story, we wanted to do something that would meet an information need. Explaining something that is a common barrier or frustration or problem for people and localizing how other people have dealt with it at a grassroots level."

Interrogate your own feelings and motivations. Ask yourself why you are telling this story. This can help you identify your own preconceived notions/perceptions and help you better understand your relationship to the story, community, and people you are reporting on. In some cases, it may also help you identify biases and power imbalances, and help you avoid inaccurate, reductive, or stereotypical coverage.

Be accountable. Respond to concerns, questions, and comments. Be willing to follow up with sources to respond to any concerns that arise from your reporting, or the publication of your story. We try our best to get things right, but in the event that a source communicates an issue with the story, be open to addressing that concern.

Documentary film [*Writing With Fire*](#) is an exploration of truth, justice and the meaning of power, through the lens of an all-women's newsroom led by Dalit women. Co-director Rintu Thomas said, "negotiating access is such a delicate and intentional process. You can have elaborate sign offs at the beginning, but accessing real consent is a consistent and continuous process that needs to be omnipresent from pre-production, to production, the editing and the distribution of the film. You're constantly keeping people close by, so everybody understands what we are doing. And building in this active choice is integral to the sinews of making a film."

Communication and setting expectations

Be flexible. Circumstances change. Natural disasters, political unrest, and global pandemics can affect your ability to continue reporting. Communities may change their protocols. Your newsroom's or editor's priorities might shift. When faced with unexpected circumstances, you must adapt, shift, start over, or even abandon, while also maintaining constant transparency and communication with the communities you are working in and with the people you are

reporting on. Be willing and able to adjust while ensuring that the hard work of building partnerships and trust remains the priority.

Share what you know. Information sharing should be a two-way street. When you're reporting a story, conducting an interview, filming a scene, etc., your job is to *gather* information, reflections, and life experiences that will inform the story. But there are also a myriad of ways that *you* can share back. For example, you could share more about what you know about the story already, or the broader topic you are reporting on. This can be a really important tool for creating reciprocity in your journalism. Instead of just taking something away from the interaction (extractive reporting), consider what you might be able to leave behind.

Juan Pablo Garnham said, “what I would always try to do – even if the person didn’t want to talk to me on the record or didn’t want it to be part of the story – would be to offer the information that I know about. I would try to connect them...tell them about the organizations that are in their area. A couple of times I actually had to be a little bit more proactive and do things that aren’t in the definition of the job.”

Time is valuable. Let people know how much time you expect from them. Get real about your expectations. We often underestimate how long the work will take and sometimes don't consider the damage that can result from not communicating clearly about the time, energy, and effort we are asking of people.

Explain your job. There is an inherent power dynamic between journalists and their sources. And between journalists and editors. And editors and newsroom leadership. Don't assume that everyone you speak to understands what journalists do. Take some time before you start an interview to explain what it is you do, what your decision-making power is, and why you are speaking with them.

While working on the virtual/augmented reality film *Still Here* for Al Jazeera, Zahra Rasool said, “the first thing we actually did was a workshop with the women from Women’s Prison Association. There were over 20 women who we did a workshop with – hearing their experiences, telling them what our intention was, what we wanted to produce – and then, we actually worked with them to write the story.”

Explain what you are asking of others. Communicate your intentions by sharing the details of your project, including what your story/project is about, estimated time commitment, and intended format and length of the published piece.

For Editors

We have a couple additional suggestions for editors and newsroom leadership.

Consider flexible deadlines. Some stories are breaking news, and others can be afforded more time. Where possible, give reporters the time they need to build relationships and maintain them. If your reporter gets a story wrong because a deadline was unrealistic, it will be much harder the next time your newsroom needs to report in that community.

Jen St. Denis, a staff reporter at Canada's [The Tyee](#) said, "editors should know that this kind of work often takes a lot of time, an incredible amount of time, a lot of back and forth...They can't be setting some sort of firm deadline for a piece to be done. They have to be pretty flexible and only be slotting it in when it's actually done. And by done, I mean, if there's an understanding from the source, if the source is going to be able to review it."

Allocate resources. We know that resources are tight. Newsrooms and budgets are shrinking, and we're constantly being asked to do more with less. But this can't be at the expense of the people you are interviewing and the communities you are working in. If you do not have the time, money, and resources to ethically report on a story, then don't.

Be accountable. As a leader, you are responsible for the safety and well-being of your team and the impact they have in the communities they are working in. Have conversations with your team about the possibility of inflicting harm on the community and damaging the reputation of your publication.

Suggested Reading/Viewing/Listening List

A list of contributors' books, films, podcasts, and stories that incorporate elements of the empowerment approach:

[The People's Guide to Community Benefits Agreements and Alternatives](#) (guidebook), City Bureau

[All Our Father's Relations](#) (documentary film), available in Canada on CBC's *Absolutely Canadian*, director Alejandro Yoshizawa

[The Territory](#) (documentary film), National Geographic, director Alex Pritz

[Ear Hustle](#) (podcast), Radiotopia

[Who's Afraid of Aymann Ismail?](#) (video series), Slate

[First Nations Forward](#) (online series), National Observer

[Crossing Divides](#), BBC

[Healing Nation](#) (documentary film), director Jamuna Galay-Tamang

[The Eviction Lab](#)

[Cabin Radio](#)

[Salmon Stories](#) (video series), Magic Canoe

[500 Years: Life in Resistance](#), [When the Mountains Tremble](#), and [Granito: How to Nail a Dictator](#) (documentary films), director Pamela Yates

[My Stolen Childhood](#) and [Dementia & Us](#) (documentary films), BBC

[Back in Touch](#), (web documentary and print series), On Our Radar and New Internationalist

[On Our Radar's Resource Hub](#) (guides/toolkits)

[Sandy Storyline](#)

[Strangers at Home](#), Global Reporting Centre

p. 20 [Writing With Fire](#) (documentary film), directors Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh

[Class of 2000](#) (film), CBS News

[Prison Journalism Project](#)

[Still Here](#) (VR film), AJ Contrast

[Turning Points](#) (documentary short series), Global Reporting Centre and PBS NewsHour

[“Fixing” the Journalist-Fixer Relationship](#), Nieman Reports

[On Bottle Binning in Chinatown](#) and [Stanley Woodvine’s Pandemic Diary](#) (online stories), The Tyee

[Chelsea, Noelle and Tatyanna Went Missing. Did Police Do Enough to Find Them?](#) (online story), The Tyee

[Decolonizing Journalism: A Guide to Reporting in Indigenous Communities](#), Duncan McCue

[The frontline of conservation: how Indigenous guardians are reinforcing sovereignty and science on their lands](#) (online story) and [Behind the scenes: how we made our Indigenous guardians feature come to life](#), The Narwhal

Credits

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- **Christopher Cheung** - Staff Reporter, [The Tyee](#)
- **Sarah Conway** - Senior Reporter and Special Project Manager, [City Bureau](#)
- **Britney Dennison** - Executive Editor, [Global Reporting Centre](#)
- **Rachel Falcone** - Filmmaker, Co-Founder, and Executive Director, [Storyline](#)
- **Jamuna Galay-Tamang** - [Documentary Filmmaker](#)
- **Juan Pablo Garnham** - Communication and Policy Engagement Manager, [Eviction Lab](#)
- **Emilee Gilpin** - Senior Communications Advisor and Community Storyteller, [Coastal First Nations](#)
- **Aymann Ismail** - Staff Writer, Podcast Host, and Producer, [Slate Magazine](#)
- **Yukari Iwatani Kane** - Co-Founder and CEO, [Prison Journalism Project](#)
- **Emily Kasriel** - [Author](#) and former [BBC](#) editor
- **Paul Myles** - Director and Founding Member, [On Our Radar Productions](#)
- **Olivia Leigh Nowak** - Story Facilitator, Filmmaker, and Founder, [le colibri STUDIO](#)

- Alex Pritz - Director, [Documist](#)
- Zahra Rasool - Head of [AJ Contrast](#), Al Jazeera Digital
- Steve Rosenbaum - Co-Founder and Executive Director, [Sustainable Media Center](#)
- Amy Standen - Editor, [Ear Hustle](#), Radiotopia
- Jen St. Denis - Staff Reporter, [The Tyee](#)
- Rintu Thomas - Co-founder and Managing Partner, [Black Ticket Films](#)
- Pamela Yates - Co-founder, Senior Creative Director, and Film Director, [Skylight Pictures](#)
- Alejandro Yoshizawa - Filmmaker, Assistant Professor at [University of the Fraser Valley](#), and Sessional Lecturer at the [University of British Columbia](#)