



Covering My Community: Tips for Responsible Reporting

These tips are based on the Covering My Community roundtable hosted by The Uproot Project in September 2023, with featured journalists Amal Ahmed, Debra Krol, and Abdullah Tijani.

How is covering a non-white community (especially an under-represented community) different than covering a predominately white community?

From Amal Ahmed: *Oftentimes, environmental justice communities (communities of color) have experienced a lack of attention and care from government agencies and, in a few cases, advocacy groups. That makes your role as an interlocutor all the more important: the folks you talk to may see a story in a newspaper or magazine as their best shot at communicating their issues; it may also be a way for people to unload and process on a deeply personal level. There may be varying levels of trust in the community around the media, but not in a “fake news” type of way, from my own experience. It’s more like a “why haven’t y’all shown up before, and why are you asking questions now” type of way. I also think you may encounter different levels of comfort with visibility: folks have concerns about their jobs, immigration status, social standing, ability to keep negotiating with government agencies on projects, etc.*

From Debra Krol: *Remember that when you know one tribal community, you know one tribal community.*

From Abdullah Tijani: *Covering a non-white, under-represented community demands an intricate blend of cultural sensitivity, historical awareness, and ethical responsibility. Unlike predominantly white communities, which often enjoy a more nuanced portrayal in media, non-white communities are frequently subject to tokenistic or stereotypical representations. This makes it imperative to approach the narrative with a multifaceted understanding, lest we inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes or overlook systemic issues.*

What are the steps someone should take to prepare for covering an under-represented community?



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From Amal Ahmed: *Never assume you have a right to anyone's story. You have to put in the work to earn trust, which often means taking a lot of time to explain the story, the publication, the angle, etc. Meet people where they are when it comes to media literacy! This is best practice for covering anyone who's a regular citizen/resident in my opinion. I also advise people to go through groups that are trusted in a community: get the big picture from folks already doing the work and familiar with the policy and other angles of the problem. Then, you can ask to talk to residents who are comfortable giving a first-hand account. If someone doesn't want to talk, don't push it. You never know what's going on in someone's life; making yourself available if they want to call/email you back is sometimes as far as I'll go. I also like to hear from folks in the community facing a challenge before I go back to a government/official source, and then I can ask questions based on the research that I have and try and get more tangible accountability for specific questions that my sources may have brought up.*

From Debra Krol: *Learn what you can about the tribal community before approaching sources. Be aware that there is a lot of bad information out there, so you are encouraged to visit the tribe's website for information. The Indigenous Journalists Association also has some great guides on how to prepare: <https://najanewsroom.com/reporting-guides/>*

From Abdullah Tijani: *To adequately prepare for reporting on an under-represented community, a journalist should conduct rigorous background research and establish trusted relationships within the community. It's essential to consult a wide array of sources, including elders, youth, and various stakeholders, to provide a rounded, comprehensive perspective. Equally vital is the need for self-reflection to recognize and set aside any personal biases that could affect the balance of the story.*

What does care for the community look like while reporting?

From Amal Ahmed: *To me, it means respecting people's boundaries and getting their stories right. It means making sure that I've checked every detail and that I'm being honest, transparent, and fair in my reporting so that if the community wants to cite the work I produce, they can feel confident that they have the best information available.*



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From Amal Ahmed, continued: *It also means that I know there are some questions I might not ask or I won't get an answer to if folks aren't comfortable talking about certain events or circumstances. And lastly, it means that after the story is published, I will take time to hear back from people about things they dislike and want changed, and make sure that I'm taking those concerns seriously as I decide what to change/keep.*

From Debra Krol: *Be aware that Native people have been misrepresented over the years and that they have also been exploited by "parachute" journalism which tends to engage in demeaning coverage such as "poverty porn." It's important to realize that these are functional, vibrant communities and to report and behave appropriately.*

From Abdullah Tijani: *Genuine care for the community while reporting translates into responsible journalism that goes beyond just gathering facts. It means continually gauging the socio-cultural impact of your words, understanding the weight they carry within the community, and remaining committed to revisiting and amending the narrative as circumstances evolve. This isn't merely ethical journalism; it's a form of sustained social advocacy.*

What would you say is the most important thing when covering your community?

From Amal Ahmed: *In Texas, I think the most important thing to remember is that people are often up against big corporate interests, a hands-off government, and a general public that may or may not care about the issue, especially if they feel it's far-flung. I try to keep things in perspective: I know that every reporting project won't magically solve a problem or cause a relatively unknown group to get the attention and resources it may deserve. But at the end of the day, storytelling has always been a powerful tool because, sometimes, what matters the most to the people in the community you're writing about is that their story gets recorded. It matters that five or fifty years from now, their history isn't lost to future activists, researchers, or residents trying to figure out a complex problem.*



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From Debra Krol: *Remember again that if you know one tribe, you know one tribe. There are hundreds of Native cultures and they often differ greatly from each other. Avoid generalization and be prepared to report on each tribe's unique culture and history.*

From Abdullah Tijani: *The most crucial aspect of reporting on my community is combining honesty, understanding, and fairness. It's not merely about stating facts but interpreting those facts within their nuanced socio-political context. I believe in journalism that not only informs but also equips the community to advocate for its own needs and aspirations. It's more than just laying out the facts; it's about providing context and meaning. My goal is to empower my community to use this information to make positive changes.*