

# Top Ten Engaging with Communities

## 1. Clarify the ground rules when engaging with new people and communities

Most people are unfamiliar with the demands placed on journalists and the idiosyncrasies of news publications. Taking the time to ensure the interviewee understands your limitations, needs and expectations will strengthen your networks and foster trust with those communities. Even more important: do not assume everyone understands basic concepts such as quotes “on” or “off” the record, or even that the choice is theirs alone to make. Spell everything out.

## 2. Be aware of privacy and security considerations

Many communities have close ties to people living under authoritarian rule overseas; what they tell a journalist in Australia can have negative consequences for friends, family or professional contacts in other countries. Even Australian-born Chinese can be vulnerable to reprisals or surveillance by the Chinese government. Seemingly trivial details about someone’s life can identify them and bring unwelcome attention from foreign agencies. When in doubt, always share your copy with your subject so they can scrub any potentially compromising information— they’ll know what to look for.

## 3. Reporters can be at risk too

For instance, the level of personal risk is greater for Chinese journalists reporting on Chinese issues. It is well documented that the degree of risk for Chinese journalists is considerable. Any news organisation needs to consult with their journalists to ensure that no one is put at risk while reporting on sensitive stories.

## 4. Understand and acknowledge potential distrust of media

Following on from 3, from a news organisation’s perspective, it is rarely clear whether it is more beneficial to have an objective outsider or a knowledgeable insider reporting on a community that finds itself the subject of media scrutiny. Ideally, any story would consider both perspectives and allow for appropriate cultural oversight. Either way journalists need to be mindful of this debate.

## **5. Look for nuance**

In recent years the Chinese Australian community has seen a significant lack of understanding in reporting on issues specifically related to them. From gross generalisations that paint all community members as of one thought to assuming that actions or events could only be related to a geo-political influence. What results from this is an expectation that all media will be negative and to be avoided.

## **6. Conditionality – we expect minority communities to prove their loyalty**

There can be an unspoken narrative that minority communities are considered “one of us” as long as they continue to demonstrate loyalty to Australia. Be careful to avoid this framing, which can often be subconscious. Do not subject minority communities to a double-standard; weigh their views in the same way you would those of other Australians.

## **7. Talk about many things**

It is doing an injustice to Australia to only approach Chinese Australians on issues related to China, only approach Africans on issues related to Africa and so on. As members of our community, they have opinions on everything from infrastructure to health services to education. Seeking their views on many topics is simply a way of representing the breadth of opinion in Australia.

## **8. Ask broad questions**

Broad, open questions can uncover the nuances of issues by allowing the interviewee to bring the complexity of their responses. If done sympathetically a person may open up and reveal illuminating details about their lives. In telling the stories and responses from minority communities a journalist needs to ensure that the subject appreciates the implications of sharing sensitive information. Cross checking this will build trust and ensure your contacts will be there the next time you reach out.

## **9. Give people time; even when deadline looms**

Allow interviewees to take time to gather their thoughts even if you need a quick response. Having a considerate and thoughtful approach will ensure you allow the individual to reflect on the ramifications of their response.

## **10. A bit of self-reflection won't go astray**

It is the job of journalists to be open-minded and curious. But everyone has cultural baggage whether they realise it or not. It is important to reflect on how your personal experiences and your assumptions about everything from family and child-rearing to attitudes to authority have informed how you approach the world and how you see those around you. Sometimes sharing this awareness can build trust with your interviewee.