

Top Ten

The Language of Storytelling

1. Language

We tell stories in words and sentences. Always write clearly and with a sense of urgency – of what is at stake here – and keep in mind a reader who is intelligent but who knows nothing of your subject. Don't assume knowledge. This obvious statement is very hard to put into practice, since the deeper we get into a subject, the more we assume everyone else knows what we are talking about. Don't avoid complexity – all good stories are complex and understanding their nuance and contradiction is vital – but strive in your language for the simplicity on the other side of complexity, and let complexity be the essential but largely unseen foundation of your story.

2. Consequences of language

Any piece of journalism depends on how it tells the story and how it attracts attention. The meaning of words is changing and some can inflame or divide. Consider the controversy that surrounded a recent headline, "Enemies of the State", use of the term Africans to describe people who may be born here or Australian citizens, or even overuse of the term, "refugees", which can evoke in many a lack of education, traumatic back stories and visible difference. The words you choose can strengthen or damage community connections.

3. Transparency of the process

Before a long or short form article is published it undergoes technical, editorial and/or legal reviews. The vast majority of ordinary people interviewed for an article are not aware of these processes or the impact that these reviews may have on the content, length or emphasis of the piece. Moreover, nearly all journalists interview more people over more time than they can possibly use in their report, so inevitably they must reduce what they have. Honesty needs to be part of any conversations with those providing input into the article to manage their expectations and to maintain the trust that your interactions have built.

4. Understand and acknowledge potential distrust of media

Many communities have not had a positive experience with the media. If you want to build and extend your networks with minority communities then you need to be familiar with previous coverage and how this has been received. If you want to build trust then find a person with links into a community who would be able to endorse your good faith. A good step is to build your personal networks through coffee chats for no particular reason other than to hear what they have to say. Most importantly don't abuse this trust. Be upfront and honest.

5. Ask

Most of us don't get everything right when we are unfamiliar with a topic or context. You don't have to be a cultural expert; you just have to be comfortable asking questions. Do you have the right language, the right spelling? Is your reference to women or older or younger members of the community appropriate and accurate?

6. Share the final result

Journalists differ over the merits of sharing a draft with an interviewee or members of a community. Whilst journalists must maintain independence of thought, showing copy to interviews demonstrates both respect and an openness to learn and adjust, while almost invariably correcting mistakes. Some interviewees might be reluctant to correct your writing but if you make them feel comfortable then this sharing will only continue to build trust with the individual and your reputation in his or her community.

7. One interview is never enough

A single person does not represent an entire community. No single conversation or comment is enough to have a balanced perspective on a community's attitudes or approaches.

8. Context

Stories about minority communities often feel obliged to reiterate a 'refugee' story or the history of the country of origin, which can create a somewhat paternalistic viewpoint, especially when it is not relevant to the story, perspective or article. Not reinforcing stereotypes is essential if you are going to represent minority communities as part of Australian society. Read widely, study human behaviour and seek to understand the complexities of society. Context is vital and learning should never end.

9. How diverse are your networks?

Build relationships in the good times. Take the time to extend your networks by visiting new coffee shops in new locations, inviting new people for informal chats just to learn more about them and their communities. Being familiar, transparent and honest is the least you can do for those you might want to approach in the future.

10. Focus on storytelling

It is easy to focus on the sensational, yet often it obstructs the story that should be told, and that is actually more interesting than the elements that grab immediate attention. By focusing on people, their stories, aspirations and frustrations, you connect across cultures, geographies and generations.