

## Journalism for Black Lives: A Reporting Guide

### Background

One major truth is that the U.S. media system has historically functioned as an arm of the broader system of racial oppression<sup>1</sup>. To disrupt that status quo, avoid compounding the harm, and to create a future where communities care to support journalism, it's critical for journalists to report in a way that is grounded in Black dignity, humanity and quality of life. This means decentering whiteness and institutions steeped in whiteness, critically questioning institutions, and transforming the process of newsgathering by engaging deeply with community people and history.

The [Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics](#) enjoins journalists to:

- Seek Truth & Report It.
- Minimize Harm.
- Act Independently.
- Be Accountable.

We have outlined tactics below that support journalists attempting ethical journalism by bringing truth to light and shifting power away from the anti-Black status quo, and into the hands of communities fighting to build a shared future.

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### ***Seek Truth & Report It. Minimize Harm.***



*Pictured: Robert Cohen's photo of Edward Crawford was part of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch's Pulitzer-winning portfolio of images from Ferguson, Missouri in 2014*

*“There is something distorted and perverse about our deaths being turned into momentary art pieces for the amusement of the performer and not action that helps lead to the freedom of the subject.”*

*—Malkia Devich-Cyril, Founder, MediaJustice*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fair.org/extra/the-colonial-roots-of-media8217s-racial-narratives/>

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In 2015, Robert Cohen and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch were awarded a Pulitzer Prize for the above photograph of activist Edward Crawford. Crawford was later charged for assault related to the incident, and two years later died under mysterious circumstances. Many questions remain about his death, and the subsequent spate of [deaths of Ferguson activists](#).

**Ethical reporting on Black uprising, oppression and despair means going beyond capturing powerful images and stories. It requires that reporters:**

- **Disrupt:** Dedicate the full weight of newsroom power to helping disrupt arrest, deportation and other carceral retaliation against the first amendment (practiced by protesters, journalists, etc). When journalists are arrested, it's frequently reported on as an affront to the first amendment. The same first amendment that protects journalists protects protesting. Consider the questions you'd ask to report on journalists being arrested; consider the actions you'd take to speak out against it or protect it from happening; take similar steps when you witness or learn of protestor arrests.
- **Dig Deep:** Deeply investigate and disrupt local forces of white-supremacist violence — state-sanctioned as well as community-based — of the type that will be invited when activists are publicly identified and celebrated. There is a lot of information that communities need regarding the state. How are police training? What places are they using as staging areas prior to a protest? Which elected officials receive money from police PACs? Questions like this both create impactful reporting and inform how communities can create change.
- **Deprioritize:** Invest time listening to community members closest to violence. Because state-sponsored, police and vigilante violence disproportionately impacts Black people, Queer & Trans people, Women and Non-Binary people, etc, coverage of this violence should disproportionately source and tell the stories of people who hold these identities. This alignment means that stories will be closer to the truth. Institutions, like corporations and police departments, have greater platforms and visibility than individuals. To create balanced and truthful reporting means balancing that visibility and deprioritizing sources who represent those institutions. All communities need information from policy and decision makers, but those decision makers also need information from communities. Balanced journalism produces both of those types of information, while also horizontally informing a variety of communities across a geography.

Most of all, ethical reporting means truthfully framing the story. The photo above was circulated widely with the assumption that Crawford was defiantly throwing the flaming canister at police. Crawford was later quoted saying, "I didn't throw a burning can back at police, I threw it out of the way of children."

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***Act Independently.***

Protests about police, vigilante, and state-sponsored violence are protests about extraction, which has threaded together the history of the United States and much of any US presence globally. This violence extracts people and power from communities, causing the very community that people have created amongst one another to disintegrate.

When journalists parachute into communities, only taking with them sources, quotes, and images of people, that is extraction. It is aligned and in solidarity with the same harm that communities are protesting. That means that instead of acting independently, journalists are acting in collusion.

That doesn't have to be the case. The guide, [Why Should I Tell You: A Guide to Less-Extractive Reporting](#), outlines twelve ways to practice something different. Some of those practices include:

- Make sure your source knows what to expect.
- Take a stance sometimes.
- When relevant, report on solutions.
- Follow up.
- Give something back.
- Know what you and your outlet bring to the table (for better or worse).

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### ***Be Accountable.***

Accountability happens most frequently when [it's rooted in relationship](#). Journalists frequently build relationships with police, governments, people who live in their immediate community, and institutions with positions dedicated to developing relationships with journalists. When protests and uprising occur, participants vary in their access to and relationship with journalists.

It's best for journalists to build these relationships in moments before crises arise, but when they are lacking, rely on people and organizations on the ground who you know or can build relationships with and ask them what stories they need told, who's best to tell those stories, and what questions they have. Tell at least some of those stories and answer as many questions as you can in your reporting. And show gratitude for the people who share their relationships and social capital with you.

Accountability also requires context. State-sanctioned violence, police brutality, and white supremacy are generations old topics. These moments of uprising are not out of nowhere. Accountable journalism has an important role to play in providing this context for those who may not have it.

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### ***Framing***

Many frames used in conventional storytelling are anti-Black and have been a critical tool for the forces of Black oppression. Today's journalists must cast a critical eye on those typical frames. Here are a few to watch out for:

- **Themes of “war” and “looting”**
  - Avoid using terms like “war zone” and “soldiers” to describe the people and places where uprisings are happening. This moves the story away from the truth of how violence has been introduced into the situation: via police murder of Black folks (i.e. George Floyd), and also via militarized police forces rolling into communities to shut down freedom of speech and protest.

These areas are not “war zones,” they are communities and neighborhoods occupied by an aggressive force seeking to maintain “order,” otherwise known as a white racial caste system.

- **Good protest vs. Bad protest**
  - The term “peaceful protest” has frequently been used as a dog whistle that completely ignores the role police have played in inciting violence. Because it is often police who incite and/or inflame violence, placing the responsibility of peaceful v. violent, good v. bad on protesters becomes a form of victim blaming. Throwing a water bottle at a person dressed in riot gear is not equivalent to unleashing wooden and rubber bullets and various forms of chemical weaponry on unprotected people. Using this good vs bad narrative plants the seeds for those uninvolved to question the righteousness of protestors’ anger in this moment.
- **“Killed” vs. “murdered” vs. “died in police custody”**
  - It is imperative that media not use passive voice when covering police brutality, saying that someone died while in police custody is applicable only when police are not, directly or indirectly, related to the person’s death. It is your responsibility to tell the truth and that includes naming that a person’s life was taken.
- **Police kneeling/participating in protests/being celebrated for not assaulting protestors**
  - Your responsibility is to share the truth, not help rehabilitate the image of policing. Stories highlighting police not assaulting protestors ignores the simple fact that should be the norm. When you treat these stories as special events, you’re helping normalize police brutality.
- **Centering the loss of capital in the midst of protesting the loss of life**
  - Equating the loss of business to the loss of life is framing that dehumanizes victims of police brutality. Many businesses, especially large corporations, are insured.

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## Additional Resources

- [The way the media frames the unrest in Minneapolis will shape the public’s view of protest](#)
- [Copspeak: 7 Ways Journalists Use Police Jargon to Obscure the Truth](#)
- [Ethical Reporting on Police Violence and Black-led Resistance: Tips for Journalists](#)
- [Best Practices for Journalists: Reporting on Police Killings of Black and Brown People](#)
- [“Official’s Say...”](#)

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