

CHAPTER 3

CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRECK SOMEONE ELSE: Protocol for Journalists Reporting on Crime and Violence in Minority Communities

Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie described in her TED Talk the dual danger and power of a single story. She argues, “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” When my cousin was murdered on July 18, 2018 his definitive story became “Boy, 14, shot to death in West Englewood.” This formulaic process did not showcase his life or include follow up a week, month or year after his death. In the eyes of the media, public, and criminal justice system, he was just another 14-year-old boy who succumbed to violence in the city of Chicago.

The media has that power every day to decide how a person’s story is broadcasted to the public. The question for television journalists becomes, how do they execute character-driven storytelling amid deadline, sources, managers, and the host of other factors that impact them on a daily basis? How can they shape stories with the people affected in mind?

The answer to those questions is a complex one. However, in interviews with journalists and producers of local news in New York City that have produced reports of crime and violence, they provided an inkling of hope and protocol for journalists. These professionals emphasized the following strategies for journalists when covering crime and violence stories: **slow down, check yourself and your newsroom, and use discretion.**

Many of the journalists and executives interviewed dubbed deadline as most invasive to a reporters’ workflow. In a cyclical television news process the goal is to

make air every time. Sometimes a reporter's sources, research, and delivery are driven by the deadline alone. A reporter from News 12 identified deadline as a high-ranking factor for the framing of one-dimensional stories, but he also identified managers as the moving force behind such hard deadlines because "they are the people that decide what gets put on air and how it gets put on air."

A close second to deadline was access to sources. In sensitive cases related to crime or violence the reality can be that victims, victims' family members, or suspects don't want to talk to reporters. A journalist from WABC best described it as, "dropping into people's lives at the most devastating time," which is why it is even more pertinent to get the story correctly in the eyes of the public. Through all the interviews, there was an emphasis on considering all sides of the equation. Meaning, in particular cases, think with empathy above editorial.

Reporters hit roadblocks in their news process often, but these professionals identified communication as a key for combating flustering moments that make or break journalism. One reporter at News 12 said, "In everything you do you have to find a way to maintain communication with your producer and build relationships with other reporters because they're also on the scene." She went on to say that the job of the producer and assignment desk is to help reporters out in the field, so if reporters get stuck, they have support in-house. Other interviewees echoed this idea and added that it is important to build relationships with other reporters at different outlets because they too are resources to help you get the job done.

When it came down to understanding if local news organizations have a formula for framing crime and violence, the answer was not so black and white. Many journalists

made a point to say they try their best to deviate from the formula and include more human elements, but they failed to provide clear ingredients of the formula. The age + race + neighborhood + incident equation revealed to be true to some extent. Journalists understood that the formula above is often done in the interest of time and lack of sources, but they also recognized that formulas in news reporting are easy to produce and they work in the eyes of most viewers. “If it bleeds, it leads.”

One reporter at News 12 synthesized the formula best, “The concrete variables that never change is the formula. The police never change. We can’t go to air with something that’s not confirmed. Now, as far as deviating from the formula, every time we go out there, we’re taught not to tell the story in our mind and write the script around that,” he said. “When you get out there things change so you have to let the story make an impression on you. That’s what we try to do, but sometimes stories are similar. If you dig deep enough there is always something that is different.”

Framing factors include the people involved and the authorities who provide clarity to the story. One of the general assignment reporters interviewed mentioned how in New York City the police have the ultimate authority, and the voice of the department often overshadows the voice of the people. He stressed the importance of finding a balance in reporting and emphasizing the humans affected.

“The police are the gatekeepers, and sometimes that’s not good because they are looking out for themselves and they might not share information that makes them look bad. It is a battle having to hold the gatekeepers accountable,” A General Assignment Reporter at News 12 said. “The gatekeepers influence what information I have... If the police don't give all the information that affects my frame of the story.”

When telling stories of crime and violence write for your readers not your sources. Journalists must understand that storytelling is a process that involves multiple players. It's like peeling back the layers of an onion. Things may seem one way in the beginning of reporting and shift completely toward the middle and end. The ever-changing nature of reporting requires journalists to be even more intentional about what sources they use to better explain the story. The reporting process must be equally accurate and honest to the people it touches. Essentially, the storytelling process must be careful and purposeful otherwise it will ensue negative impacts among viewers.

Many of the interviewees identified that stories of this nature could be done better if more follow up is done to combat definitive story lines. However, interviewees expressed resistance for follow up on behalf of their news organization because of power dynamics. They described their stations as either manager-led or producer-led. According to these journalists, producer-led newsrooms are more open to follow up and investigation, whereas manager-led newsrooms are more likely to be concerned about ratings and the "if it bleeds it leads" reality of crime coverage. In most cases, journalists expressed that follow up stories are rare.

Journalists interviewed for this study argued that storytelling is about finding the individual affected and tailoring the message around it or the larger issue. It's about the people first, and the people sometimes get lost in formulaic approaches, deadlines, and in edits by managers. Nevertheless, reporters interviewed for this study identified the following strategies for creating more multi-dimensional stories related to crime and violence:

One, slow down. Don't let your lesson about catering to your audience be an afterthought. By slowing down in your reporting process you are able to think about the humans involved and how you would want this story covered if it happened to you or someone you loved. An Emmy Award-winning anchor and reporter admitted, "one thing that none of us do well is follow up." Slowing down could also mean not being too eager to continue on to the next story. Take time to digest what you've reported on and see if there's more that needs to be uncovered.

A journalist at WABC shared how she slows down and thinks about the humans involved, "I try to memorialize a life instead of just recording a death. And I feel it's a big difference," she said. "Some people do it like 24-year-old Johnson died. But I try to say, the 24-year old-father, who had three jobs. You're putting a little bit of a human element."

One reporter described character-driven stories as reporters being the autobiographer of the public's story. She believes, "Once you have your character you don't speak for them, you let them tell you what to say... You're just telling their story through their eyes."

Slowing down the process means taking your time, literally. All interviewees admitted that a story is never complete. There is always room for follow up. Just because a newscast is over, doesn't mean the story ends with it. Don't be afraid to pitch follow up stories with different angles that weren't previously covered. Granted, there isn't much time for follow up, and interviewees said especially in New York City, news of the day wins. But, slowing down mid-reporting is such an important part of the news gathering process.

Slow down and put yourself in someone else's shoes. The rush of deadline and the pressure of managing editors are all temporary. The lasting effects of a reporter's work is in the lives they impact because of the work they do.

Two, check yourself and your newsroom. Many journalists interviewed self-proclaimed to "check themselves" in the field. To check themselves, they said they put their biases out of the story, they understood their position and how their personal identity may inherently affect the way a story is framed, and ultimately scrapping it so that it doesn't seep into the story they are trying to tell. A part of checking yourself and your newsroom including your superiors is to understand that all things work together for the whole. News reporting is a process, and sometimes mistakes are made when reporters think more about the factors driving the story rather than the story itself.

"I think it's important for young journalists to think about the story they are covering and not go into the story with a checklist of things to get. That's really the wrong approach," said one award-winning storyteller. "A lot of reporting goes wrong and is less effective because they don't think about the victims or the subjects in the story. Quite honestly, some journalists use the victims and the circumstances as props for a made-for-tv movie about themselves."

Don't be so pressed to get every fact into a story. Checking yourself means prioritizing the information you have. One journalist simply put it, "people connect with people." How are you using people to tell the story and not bombarding the viewer with facts because an editor said so or because it's the word of officials?

The most self-aware part of reporting is knowing what to include and what not to include. This idea was reverberated amongst all interviewees. By checking yourself in

real-time, you check your newsroom. You aren't afraid to provide diverse ideas in morning meetings, you won't be fearful of adding new elements to a story, and you won't back away from digging deeper in the interest of time.

One reporter shared with me a time she didn't check herself when covering a story about welfare benefits. The reporter made the mistake of interviewing only Black people. It wasn't until after the story was published, she received backlash about perpetuating negative stereotypes. It was in that moment, she said she vowed to always consider the stakeholders and how stories will be perceived to the public. She has never made that misjudgment again. By checking herself, she in turn checked her newsroom.

Diverse thoughts and people are necessary for the advancement of any news organization. "We talk about sensitivity to victims and whether or not you should use the race of a suspect. It is something that came from my manager/news director," said a reporter from WPIX. "It is something that she's aware of and has shared with the entire newsroom." Checking yourself requires journalists to be aware of how something might be interpreted at every step of the reporting process.

Three, use your discretion. This point ties into prioritizing your information. Everything gathered in the process is not news. When thinking of the implications of how things can be interpreted, ask yourself is certain information needed. One reporter described it as a delicate balance. The industry standard is fairness and objectivity. Be cognizant how certain words or phrases can impact the viewer and persons affected.

Discretion is an important step in the news creation process. For example, a 10-year-old boy was killed in Brooklyn after an SUV jumped the curb during the driver's medical episode. One reporter mentioned that another local station included in their

reporting that the boy was looking down at his phone at the time of the incident. This reporter said she didn't include that fact into the story because she felt like it diminished the child's death.

Each journalist confirmed in their own way why it's necessary not to lose sight of the people you're working for. Consider the emotions of the people you spoke to, and that's how you use your discretion in real-time. This does not mean coddle your subjects or leave out information relevant to the story, but it does go back to thinking with empathy over editorial. All journalists stressed the value of people-driven stories. The human experience is what journalists strive to tell. One reporter at WCBS described this process as getting people to feel and care about both sides of the story.

One journalist said it perfectly, "Overall, you have to think of it like this: did you feel what the people were feeling enough in order to relay it to people who weren't there?" That's the job of a journalist, and that is why people and stories matter more than the formulaic desensitizing equation executed because of editors, deadline, sources, etc.

In recent years, journalists are becoming more reflective of the work they are doing. This approach is more self-aware and requires journalists to think about their production process while they work in order to combat care-related mistakes. It is a movement scholars are calling delayed-gratification or slow journalism. Megan Le Masurier described in her study of slow journalism that this method involves discovering multiple perspectives through ethics of care, "the Slow movement itself, is more a critical orientation to the effects of speed on the practice of journalism." If the frame of my cousin's murder was done in the spirit of slow journalism, his depiction would've

been more mindful of who he was, considered the feelings of his loved ones, and included follow up as needed to better broadcast his life to the public.

The initial questions of the study were to explain how do journalists execute character-driven storytelling amid deadline, sources, managers, and the host of other factors that impact them on a daily basis? And how can journalists shape stories with the people affected in mind? The answer lies in journalists doing their job better by following the recommendations of fellow journalists, and also by keeping in mind who they are working for. According to the [Society of Professional Journalists](#), the first principle of ethics is to seek truth and report it by providing context, and “taking special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.” So, in all cases, it’s better to check yourself first before you wreck someone else.