

Diversity and the Newsroom: Tips for Expanding Coverage and Supporting Reporters of Color

I thought it was important to draw from my experiences and some of the great work the Columbus Dispatch has been doing recently around diversity. We are not perfect, but I've been encouraged by the steps we have taken during the last year.

Seeking out the responses of diverse audiences to major news can help generate diverse, localized stories. And it's important to remember that how audiences of color respond is often different than narratives we see in mainstream media or among all-white groups. One easy way to do this is to pay attention to social media, whether it's your own timeline, or going to the accounts of prominent activists or leaders of color. For example, after Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of homicide, I was seeing much of the same sentiment from Black folks on my timeline. For example, Scott Woods is a writer here in Columbus, and he has a weekly column with our sister publication, Columbus Alive. Although he is quoting from his article, many others were sharing the same thoughts.

So, I was happy to see that the Dispatch did a follow-up article centering the voices of Black leaders following the verdict. If we wanted to pursue another article in this vein, we might look at research on people of color who were in similar situations as Rittenhouse and facing similar charges, but who may not have been acquitted—especially in Ohio—and see if the data shows a glaring discrepancy.

There *is* public data on Stand Your Ground laws disproportionately harming Black folks, which is another reason why Black folks were concerned about the Rittenhouse verdict. And when the Stand Your Ground law was passed in Ohio, there was an immediate fear among Black folks, who expressed their concern in social media posts.

The Dispatch could have done a separate article on this reality for Black people, but I was happy to see that the writers included this issue within the main story, and linked to some of the data. I also was pleasantly surprised to see that the Black community was centered in the photo. I think this is a great

way to highlight diverse issues if you are unable to do another article in a short window of time.

However, nothing should stop us from doing another article on this in the future.

It wasn't difficult to find different perspectives on the tragic death of Gabby Petito; pretty early on, we heard voices from communities of color about the lack of attention paid to missing people of color and the #missingwhitewomansyndrome. This is an important discussion, that the media can continue to highlight, while also reporting on more missing people of color as much as possible. Media outlets were able to do that with their opinion sections.

Around that time, the Columbus Dispatch reported on Sacoya, a missing trans woman of color. And then, our opinion and community engagement editor, Amelia Robinson, wrote a thoughtful column...At any given point, there are missing people of color from all neighborhoods and cities. Moving forward, I think media outlets should just commit to doing a certain number of these stories each year so that the work speaks for itself year-round, and not just when #missingwhitewoman syndrome is a topic of discussion again. This is also a great opportunity to take a look at the unique risks for trans women of color, who are being killed at an alarming rate—we've been talking about doing stories on this at the Dispatch, so hopefully we will make that a reality in the near future.

Here in Columbus, the death of 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant made national news. She was shot four times by a Columbus police officer. She had a knife and was in the middle of a dispute with another female. On my timeline, I kept seeing posts from teachers and social workers about how they have de-escalated similar situations that did not result in the death of a young person...

I wasn't seeing their perspective in the media, so I decided to interview teachers and social workers about this. I also think my colleagues at the Columbus Dispatch did a tremendous job of reporting on Ma'Khia's death in a nuanced, holistic way that honored her humanity. We immediately had a meeting to talk about how we should be reporting on it and divided up responsibilities. My colleagues

interviewed her friends to talk about who she was. Because she was in a foster home, they looked at problems in the foster care system, and how they especially impact Black girls. We also looked at the number of juveniles killed in Columbus by police and how that compared to nationwide statistics.

One of the most impactful stories was done by Amelia Robinson for the opinion section. She put together a spread of love letters written to Black girls by Black women in the community. Ma'Khia's death reiterated the unique challenges that Black girls face, and how they are not always portrayed positively in the media. Moving forward, I think media outlets can make a commitment to doing more stories highlighting Black girls in a positive way year-round.

Now, I'd like to share some other ways to push for more diverse coverage in the newsroom. At the Dispatch, I suggested a monthly diversity audit, which the editors graciously implemented. Each month, we devote one of our regular team meetings to analyzing our recent coverage. We ask ourselves three questions: First, what were our wins? This is an opportunity for reporters to call out what we did well, which also allows us to give our co-workers a positive shout-out. Next, we ask, what were our missed opportunities or areas for improvement? We want to make sure that this is a positive discussion, we don't call specific people out or take an accusatory tone. It's as simple as saying, "I'm glad we covered the Stand Your Ground law, but I think we have an opportunity to better highlight how this affects people of color..." or, "I've been hearing from leaders in the Latino community that they don't see themselves reflected in our newspaper. How can we improve that?" That conversation naturally leads into the third question, which is, "What specific, diverse story ideas can we work on in the next month/near future?" For example, we could say, "Black History Month is right around the corner. Can we develop a strategy for doing Black-focused stories across all of our beats?" This also gives reporters an opportunity to share stories they are already working on and possibly get some advice.

I'm sure some of these other tips have been included in other presentations, but it doesn't hurt to repeat. As reporters, we should be mindful of our sources. Are we tapping the same group of people for our stories? Are we including a diversity of race, gender, age and neighborhood? For example, if we want to speak to small business owners about the impact of the pandemic, we should be sure to include a business owner of color. Don't be afraid to ask for help from other colleagues; perhaps a reporter covering immigrant communities or race and gender could offer some contacts. Of course, we should be sure that we are developing our own contacts, so we don't have to go to other reporters over and over again.

It's also important to get another pair of eyes on stories that cover diverse issues—not just your editor. It could be another reporter or editor you trust. It also helps to discuss stories with people outside of the newsroom—of course, you're not sharing your copy, but if you are reporting on a delicate issue in the LGBTQ community, it doesn't hurt to call someone in that community to talk through concerns.

Finally, we have to speak up when a story or headline is problematic. This could be done privately with an editor. Again, we shouldn't be calling specific people out in group settings, but if we know that an article is going out and it may prove harmful to a community, it's important to say something. This can be done in a constructive way in a meeting. It's easy as saying, "Can we talk through scenarios where this section of the article or this headline might not be well-received?"

When it comes to supporting reporters of color, the first step is diversity, equity and inclusion training in the newsroom. I think this should be mandatory and ongoing. For example, at the Dispatch, we have been having sessions with a local organization. I've voiced my opinion that this should continue—maybe once per quarter.

Beyond that, I think editors should be mindful of the extra trauma reporters of color face when reporting on racism and ask if a mental health day is needed. Also, I think it's important to offer breaks

from heavy stories. For example, an editor can assign a “lighter” story following a major report on racism. I’ve learned to ask for these things myself, but it helps when the editor is proactive.

Reporters of color often feel isolated in predominantly white newsrooms. It’s important to ensure they are being included in social outings hosted by other colleagues. Or, especially when a new reporter of color joins the newsroom, it’s worth reaching out for a one-on-one coffee just to get to know them.

Finally, like many other industries, people of color are not promoted at the same rate. Editors and managers should be proactive when it comes to talking to employees of color about career goals and paths to advancement.

Those are just a few tips that I wanted to share based on personal experience. Thank you all again for coming today and listening to my presentation. Let me know if you have any questions, comments or tips of your own to share.