Beyond the Ballot: Equity framing for covering democracy and elections

Traditional horse race political reporting tends to flatten public discourse into us vs. them narratives, and research has found this can have harmful effects on our media and democracy.

An alternative to the horse race is community-focused solutions journalism, and combining this approach with equity framing allows for richer, more nuanced narratives that draw upon some of the unique attributes, backgrounds, experiences, and challenges that people face. Including fair representation of diverse voices can result in more accurate and inclusive portrayals of marginalized communities. When we talk about equity framing we're looking at things like gender, race, socio-economic and housing status, ability, and power structures, which are key to understanding U.S. democracy and politics.

Here are some tips to bolster your election reporting with an equity and solutions lens:

☐ Use solutions journalism. Examine the evidence behind policy proposals, and ground your reporting in the experiences of those directly impacted.

☐ Center the stakes. Make it clear to readers how policies and the administration of elections impact voting rights for historically excluded communities.

☐ Use a solutions frame to cover where communities are making progress. SJN's Solutions Story Tracker has a growing collection of stories about where progress is being made in response to challenges to voter access, including those focused on historically marginalized communities — for the formerly incarcerated, for example, and for people who don't speak English.

☐ Use inclusive language. Use terms that honor and explain person-first and identity-first language, while respecting an individual's preference for how they want to be described. Think about how you refer to people when it comes to things related to gender, age, disability, socio-economic status, race or ethnicity, for example. Instead of calling someone a "homeless person" use people-first language such as a "person who is homeless." Or instead of calling someone "mentally ill," refer to them as "a person with a mental illness" or "person living with a mental disorder." Don't assume that an individual you interview uses gendered pronouns – ask what they prefer. The American Psychological Association has more guidance on using inclusive language.

Reporter's checklist:

Here are some questions to ask to help center equity in the four pillars of solutions journalism during the reporting process:

1. **Focus on a response to a problem.**

   ○ Does the story explain HOW the response works?
   ○ Are people who are affected by the problem AND solution being included as sources?
   ○ Am I interviewing diverse sources that represent the demographics of the community?
   ○ Did I only interview representatives of government or large organizations, or did I include community organizers and members of local organizations.
   ○ Does the story examine systemic issues and policies that impact efforts to achieve equity?

2. **Give evidence to explain how well the response is working.**

   ○ Did I ask for documentation to support claims for how well the response is working?
   ○ Are the experts being quoted only from government agencies or other large institutions or companies?

3. **Share insights into the lessons the response holds for others.**

   ○ Does the story focus on underrepresented communities and help amplify their voices?
   ○ Does the story discuss how power structures relate to the problem and the response?
   ○ Have I accounted for the intersectionality of people's identities and how this may affect their experiences, as well as the problem and response?

4. **Discuss the limitations of the response.**

   ○ Who is doing it better? Don't be afraid to look to other communities for answers to the questions you are looking for.
   ○ What challenges will people from marginalized groups face when trying to implement the response?
   ○ Have I spoken to individuals in the community the response is targeting to find out if they actually think the response is helping?

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Editor's checklist:

Editors can use these items as they work with reporters on solutions stories:
- Prioritize stories that focus on underrepresented communities and amplify their voices.
- Avoid reinforcing stereotypes and biases.
- Examine how intersecting forms of discrimination contribute to social inequities.
- Advocate for inclusive policies and actions that address the specific needs of intersectional communities.
- Understand the limitations and potential biases of data in regard to marginalized communities.
- Is disaggregated data useful for providing a more nuanced understanding of how social issues impact different social groups, as well as solutions implemented?
- Use images that accurately depict the diversity of the community being covered.
- Avoid using headlines and images that reinforce stereotypes or sensationalize.
- Include images that show people in positions of power and influence from diverse backgrounds.

Articles to read:

1. Important context for journalists covering the 2024 elections
   https://sjn-static.s3.amazonaws.com/SJN_Democracy_Landscape.pdf?mc_cid=f7f056a709&mc_eid=7f55784238
2. Solutions Reporting Checklist: 6 Steps to help your community move forward
   https://sjn-static.s3.amazonaws.com/Democracy_Guide.pdf
3. "Disaggregation is essential to achieve data justice for Asian Americans"
   https://prismreports.org/2022/05/02/disaggregation-data-justice-asian-americans/
4. "For a lot of people, there has never been trust"
   https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/for-a-lot-of-people-there-has-never-been-trust-d0c6095cefd3
5. "Five Tips on Reporting Solutions Stories for/with Marginalized Communities"
   https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/five-tips-on-reporting-solutions-stories-for-with-marginalized-communities-d524d90360ab
6. "Understanding bias"
   https://americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/bias-objectivity/understanding-bias/
7. "A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families: Representations of Families, by Race, in News and Opinion Media"
   https://colorofchange.org/dangerousdistortion/
8. Hey white colleagues: We need to talk about these non-inclusive lists and panels you're always putting together
   https://nonprofitaf.com/2023/10/hey-white-colleagues-we-need-to-talk-about-these-non-inclusive-lists-and-panels-youre-always-putting-together/