

Why Should I Tell You?: A Guide to Less-Extractive Reporting

What vulnerable communities stand to gain — or lose — from sharing their stories with reporters, and what reporters are doing about it.



Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism public engagement and marketing assistant Natalie Yahr interviews Bob Blersch on primary day at the Oconomowoc Community Center on August 14, 2018, as part of the Center's ongoing series "Undemocratic: Secrecy and Power vs. the People." (Katie Scheidt / Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism)

BY NATALIE YAHR



[For black folks in post-Katrina New Orleans] the water is at least 30 feet deep... and by telling my story, hopefully we can get somebody to say, 'Oh' and throw a lifeline, throw some support our way — just a lifeline that will pull people up that are drowning, that don't have housing, that don't have a job.

But now I'm getting pickier about how I tell my story, [wondering,] 'What are you doing with the story?' I don't see no support. I don't see no lifeline coming back....

— Alfred Marshall, New Orleans community organizer

Introduction

I'm still early in my journalism career, but I've already encountered a number of situations that have made me question the role journalists should play as they cover people who are in some way suffering.

I once interviewed a man who had been shot on multiple occasions when he was young. The man, who had been reluctant to speak with me, agreed only because his good friend set up the interview and vouched for me. As a producer for [Listening Post New Orleans](#), I was looking for gunshot survivors for a [collaboration](#) with [The Trace](#), and while the data said there were lots of these people in New Orleans, my team discovered that finding them and getting them to talk to us was another matter. So when community organizer Alfred Marshall told me he could connect me with a few survivors he knew and that they'd all be at a boxing gym for [Stand with Dignity](#)'s membership meeting, I came out.

As I sat in front of Raynell Navarre on the floor of the boxing gym, he told me about getting picked on and later getting shot, about recovering from his injuries, and about the fear he dealt with afterward. I nodded along, trying to show my interest and understanding in my face so as not to mess up the audio recording. And when I asked him if he'd gotten any counseling, his answer surprised me.

He had received mental health services for years, he told me, but "there wasn't no time that they

would sit down and really counsel you with anything." Instead, he said, "it was mostly pills that was put in your hand. I wish I coulda got some therapy like what we're sittin' here doin' now, sittin' here talkin' it over, you know, and lettin' me explain myself to you instead of you tellin' me what it was about and givin' me a pill."

I think any journalist can appreciate the ethical questions these comments raise. On the one hand, it's good when a source feels at ease and has a chance to share his feelings. On the other hand, the journalist is not a counselor, and the fact that the source doesn't have access to counseling services is troubling. What's the appropriate role of the journalist in this situation, and in other situations like this one?

With this guide, I aim to help journalists navigate the ethical dilemmas they encounter as they interview people who have experienced harm. While there are [numerous practical guides](#) on such interviewing, especially on trauma journalism, I have yet to find a guide that explores the deeper ethical questions of what conditions, if any, make such journalism morally justifiable and not purely extractive or voyeuristic. I've also encountered little public record of journalists discussing these ethical questions though I am confident that such conversations happen, whether at conferences or in private.

This guide aims to bring those conversations to the wider public so that journalists and non-journalists alike can see how some of us are thinking through these questions and trying new approaches in search of a more mutually beneficial journalism.

I conducted interviews, primarily by phone, with eight journalists who I thought may be giving these ethical questions some extra thought. I chose journalists to interview based on their type of coverage and sources, their reporting methods and what I knew about their philosophical approach. I aimed to speak to journalists working in traditional accountability reporting, solutions journalism and engagement reporting.

I also spoke with a non-journalist who has been interviewed frequently over the years, including by me, in his role as a community organizer.

He had expressed to me in the past that he's become hesitant to do interviews, as he must put his own pain or his community's pain on display and he doesn't see any help coming back to his community as a result. He agreed to be interviewed to discuss his concerns and recommendations.

With each source, I had an on-the-record conversation that I recorded. I told them in advance that I was trying to find out what they believe their reporting offers their sources and how they justify asking people to talk about difficult things. For each interview, I adapted a common set of questions, so some questions were the same for all sources but some were unique. The conversations were generally 45 minutes to an hour long. Some sources requested to see quotes before I published, and some quotes have been changed to provide more context or clarity.

From these interviews, I distilled a set of key takeaways.

Rule # 1: Make sure your sources know what to expect.

A few things came up every time I interviewed a journalist for this project. The first was the importance of making sure the source knows what they're getting into by talking to a reporter. Journalist after journalist told me that when they interview people who aren't used to working with the media, they're ethically required to do more than just let the person know they're on the record.

Alex V. Hernandez, who co-founded the immigrant stories website [90 Days, 90 Voices](#) (which has [its own excellent guide](#) to ethical reporting on immigrants and refugees), says when he interviews media-savvy people, "we're both playing from the same playbook." But when he talks with other sources, such as immigrants and refugees, he doesn't assume they understand the relationship. Instead, he begins with a conversation about the way the reporting could affect them, asking specifically what could put them or their family in danger in the U.S. or in another country.

If they decide to talk with him anyway, he tries to

avoid including information that would put the source at risk. In some cases that means leaving out names or photos. And the risks conversation doesn't stop once the interview begins. He says that each time a source tells him something that could be used to identify or incriminate them, he'll ask again, "Are you sure you want to tell me that?" In this way, he reminds the source of the risks and allows them to decide what to share and withhold.

Melissa Sanchez, a reporter with [ProPublica Illinois](#), starts her interviews with a similar conversation. She jokes that it's almost like she's trying to dissuade the source from talking to her.

"It's your choice. We can't tell your story without your consent," she tells them.

Sanchez says her approach is inspired in part by her mother, an immigrant who might not know how to protect her own interests in an interview.

"I treat people with a lot of care," she says, "like I'd want someone to treat my mother."

Sanchez knows that harm might come to immigrants who speak to her, and she's learned from experience that she can't always anticipate what that harm might be. Reporting for the Yakima Herald in her early twenties, she went to a small town to report on a [grower that had just fired much of its workforce](#) following an audit by immigration officials. The company, which was the main employer in the small town, had been looking the other way on its employees' immigration status for years.

After spending two days finding people who would only speak off the record, she met a recently fired orchard worker who was willing to go on the record and use his name. Sanchez warned him about the risk that the federal government might investigate his immigration status, though he did have a common name — Antonio Sanchez — which might have kept him safe. He told her in the interview that he was considering re-applying for a job with the company, the only work in town, with a different Social Security number.

A few days after the story published, Melissa Sanchez got a call from the man, who said the

company wouldn't hire him because he had spoken to the press.

"He kept saying, 'What am I supposed to do?'" recalls Sanchez. "My heart sank... The last thing you want is for people's lives to get worse because they talk to you," she says. She knew she couldn't help the man personally, but she passed his information to a friend who did immigration work in Seattle.

To this day, she's not sure what came of the man or if she did the right thing. But, she says, that experience has changed how she does her job.

"I think about that man everyday," she says, and she tells that story to sources as they're deciding whether to go on the record. "I want them to know as much as I know."

Elizabeth Van Brocklin, a staff reporter for [The Trace](#), knows all about these conversations, having spent three years reporting on people who've been shot and survived. (Check out her outstanding guide on reporting on shooting survivors [here](#)). For her, it also means warning potential sources about the emotional toll the interview could take, as recalling trauma is never easy. And she makes sure they understand that even if they spend hours talking to her, they could end up being just a few lines in the larger story, or they might not appear in the story at all, but that sharing their story still helps inform the piece overall.

Given all the warnings, why would anyone talk to a reporter?

Some might just really want to tell stories. Van Brocklin says she talks with some sources who launch into their stories before she can finish her disclaimers, perhaps because they don't have someone else to talk to about what's happened to them.

But Melissa Sanchez says sometimes sources are willing to take the risk because they're fed up with their situation and think the consequences of not saying something could hurt other people. Community organizer Alfred Marshall, who refers to himself as "a black man in New Orleans that's struggling," says he talked to the press about the "jobs crisis" his public housing

community was facing because the situation was dire.

"Ain't nobody guaranteed me nothing" he says. Since he was on parole, he knew that speaking up could cost him his job and land him back in prison. But he says he "wouldn't mind going back to the system for something that's right." Though he experienced retaliation, his public stance also protected him.

"The people I was fighting against couldn't touch me," he says. "There was pushback, but then it was powerful." He credits the [coverage](#) (by then-Times Picayune journalist Katy Reckdahl) with helping his group [reach an agreement](#) with the development company for better paying jobs.

Rule #2: Don't mislead or confuse your sources (even with the best intentions).

Multiple journalists told me that they take steps to avoid making false promises to sources, but none put it quite so plainly as Lewis Wallace, who reports on marginalized groups and writes about power, race and transgender issues. "Journalists love to deceive ourselves about how important our work is because it makes us feel better about doing sometimes morally ambiguous things," says Wallace, referring to the common tendency to hope our stories will have an impact on policy or society. "I think journalists have a self-interest in telling ourselves that our story is going to make a difference, and so where I draw the line is telling someone else that."

Wallace recalls [a story he produced](#) while working for radio station WYSO. He interviewed an undocumented mother about the ways she was being kept out of her daughter's educational experience. He was careful not to tell the woman that the story would serve her interests or cause a policy change. Looking back, he's glad he didn't.

"I mean, think about what's happened with immigration, right? It would have just been so untrue," says Wallace, with a knowing laugh. "Things have just gotten worse and worse for undocumented immigrants since then." Instead of trying to persuade people, Wallace

says, “I try to see if people will trust me on the basis of what the relationship actually is.”

When people are in vulnerable situations, they may believe that telling their story publicly will help them, as Alejandro Fernández saw while reporting on the immigration system for Univision, a beat that involved speaking with people buried in debt to a bond company or facing the risk of deportation:

“It is a fact, I think, that these people expect something from you, and they really think that if you are from Univision, you can change the world and you can help them and give them money, and you can do a lot of things, and you can put their case on TV and everything is going to change. And I think you have to be really, really honest with them and tell them that you cannot promise anything like that, and if that happens, that is like an exceptional situation... because usually Univision or any other media outlet cannot change the whole bond system and make it fair from out of one article. That is not the usual thing.”

ProPublica Illinois reporter Melissa Sanchez says she interviewed one immigrant family that hadn’t been able to hire a lawyer. They hoped that if they went public with their story, a lawyer might show up the next day to take their case — they’d heard about such things happening before. Sanchez says all she could do was reiterate that she couldn’t guarantee anything.

“It’s really hard to say that... At the core, you wish that everybody had equal access to attorneys and equal access to knowledge and the ability to maneuver themselves around this really complicated system, but that’s not our job to do that for them,” says Sanchez. “And it’s really hard to accept that, but you just hope that the work that you’re doing is bigger and can affect people in a more systematic way and not just in one individual case.”

And it’s not just at the start of the interview that this confusion can happen. ProPublica [engagement](#) reporters [place callouts](#) asking members of specific impacted communities to respond to reporters’ questions. (More on that process [here](#).) Those callouts sometimes generate thousands of responses, says Terry Parris Jr.,

former deputy editor of engagement. He might be in communication with a community for months or years, which he says can change the dynamic between reporter and source:

“With engagement reporting... you’re reaching out to a lot of people, you’re asking them to fill out [a survey](#) or a call-out questionnaire... [for example] because [they’ve been exposed to Agent Orange](#) or their spouse has or their dad has...

I think they begin with the idea that this is a news organization, but the more you talk to them, the more you engage with them, the more I would send emails and let them know about our reporting and our stories or ask them questions about groups they participate in... the role of the journalist starts to turn into, ‘Oh, it’s Terry. I’ve been talking to Terry the whole time.’ And when I email them or message them, I’m talking about like, ‘We’re doing more reporting,’ ‘We’re continuing on this story,’ and ‘We’re talking to the VA,’ and, ‘We’re waiting for our FOIAs,’ and ‘We’re going to a file a lawsuit,’ and all these things.

And they start to think there’s an advocacy angle, that we are there to fight for their rights at the VA to get benefits. [But] what we’re trying to do is write a story that shows the VA ... may be falling short in some ways to protect and support veterans who... have illnesses because of exposure.

Sometimes I’ll have to remind them that we are not an advocacy organization. I am not lobbying in Congress on the behalf of veterans, and I am not some advocate lawyer that’s gonna go off and advocate for veterans at the VA. We’re gonna write stories, and we’re gonna try to expose issues, and we need the help of veterans to expose those issues.... And so I have to remind people that I am a reporter, I am a journalist, and we are looking for the truth. I guess we could be advocates for the truth, if anything... but we are not advocates for veterans.”

Rule # 3: Take a stance sometimes.

When a source talks with a journalist about the harms they have suffered, it would be strange to say that the journalist shouldn’t care about those harms. Journalists are human, and humans should be empathetic. But where is the line

between recognizing the source's pain and striving to change the circumstances that hurt them?

Journalism schools and ethics codes emphasize that journalists shouldn't take sides, but several journalists I spoke to believe seeking change is part of what journalism — or at least investigative journalism — is all about.

Melissa Sanchez of ProPublica Illinois (which describes itself as “an independent, nonprofit newsroom that produces investigative journalism with moral force”) says seeking impact is a common tenet, especially among investigative journalists:

“We invest time and resources into investigating something with the goal that it's going to have impact, to improve whatever the situation is. We're not writing nice stories about happy families that are going on picnics. We're doing stories about problems and exposing what's gone wrong and hoping that that leads to change...”

I think it's disingenuous to say, even at the most traditional news outlet, that there's absolutely zero hope or expectation that doing investigative reporting is going to lead to [something]... The Chicago Tribune didn't invest years in [covering an inequitable property tax assessment system](#) just to do it... If you discover that police are [wrongly arresting black people just to increase their numbers](#) — which is what's happened in Florida in this community outside of Miami — you don't do it just to do it. You do it because it's wrong and it shouldn't happen. And if I were to do that story, I don't know what the solution is, but it's definitely not what's happening at the moment...

...I mean, we don't advocate for a specific change or for a specific politician to come in and save the day. Those are the kind of places that I think there is rightfully reservation about appearing to be [biased]... I'm not writing stories about [these detention centers in Chicago](#) because I want a different contractor to come in and do the work... but we're exposing a system that's really hurting children. And I don't know what the solution is, and it's not my job to figure that out, but I know that there's a problem with how it looks today...

And if you just lay it out there — I don't want to sound

naive, like ‘Hopefully someone will come and fix it’ — but hopefully if the story is told well enough, people will read it and be inspired or outraged or have conversations about it, and these are pieces that are necessary in order to get the set of changes to happen.”

When Sanchez reported on the way that Chicago's vehicle ticketing process has [disproportionately affected the city's African-American and Latino residents](#), for example, she says her goal was to get stories in front of the people who have power and the people who have influence over those people. It seems to be working: The coverage has prompted numerous reform initiatives, including the creation of a new city task force and the canceling of 23,000 duplicate tickets, and every one of the 14 candidates in Chicago's February mayoral election said they supported ticket reform.

You might not hear this stance in journalism school, but Sanchez doesn't think it's anything to be embarrassed about.

“Again, there's lines,” she says, like that she can't advocate for a particular political candidate. “And so I could understand a reporter saying, ‘You can't be biased in that area,’ but you can be biased in seeing inequity or harm and saying, ‘This is not acceptable.’”

Some things are clear-cut, she says, citing her colleague's recent reporting on [allegations of abuse in Chicago psychiatric hospitals](#).

“Kids should not be sexually abused when they're wards of the state in the hospital. That's wrong,” Sanchez says. And so you do stories hoping that these kids will get put into safer places. And I think it's OK to say that out loud: ‘I don't want kids to be sexually harmed.’ Right? Who can argue with that?”

In fact, she says, taking such positions is imperative.

“There's something wrong with you if you think you can't take that position,” she says. “You can take the position of saying, ‘Children should not be harmed.’ You can take the position of saying, ‘People should not be wrongfully arrested.’”

But Sanchez acknowledges that some reporters aren't so confident in that role. For her, she says, it's come with time.

"The older I get, the more comfortable I am saying that and taking those positions," she says. "I have to be careful how I say it, and my editor is always reminding me, 'You can't go too far.'"

And, Sanchez notes, it's not right for every situation.

"You can't just come to these conclusions," she says. "You have to do a lot of reporting to get to that point to say, 'Here's the data. Here's the proof that this system is screwing people in x, y and z ways.'"

One factor that can determine whether journalists take a stance is the culture of their newsroom. When a USA TODAY-Wisconsin team learned that Wisconsin's youth depression and suicide rates were among the highest in the country, they decided that their reporting on this issue need not be neutral. There weren't two sides to the debate — Wisconsin's number, they argued, was unacceptably high and pointed to clear problems that needed to be addressed. They would strive to use journalism and community engagement approaches to improve mental health and reduce stigma.

Rory Linnane, who worked on the [Kids in Crisis](#) series as a special projects reporter for USA TODAY-Wisconsin, says that stance shaped the reporting from the start. As she interviewed parents who had lost their children to suicide, the parents knew that her team was trying, through the stories, to prevent these sorts of tragedies. Linnane spoke of that goal and the emotional challenges of the reporting in "[Rory's Diary](#)," an unusually candid look behind the scenes.

But the goal went beyond the team's hopes for their stories. It meant that they purposefully reported on problems, such as Wisconsin's shortage of psychiatrists, and solutions, such as hiring more school counselors. And it led them to hold events with clear aims, such as [public trainings](#) on the [Question-Persuade-Refer](#) strategy for preventing suicide.

Linnane says, as far as she knows, the team didn't

get any pushback for the stance they took, though she acknowledges that this might be a special sort of issue.

"We hit on an area where almost everyone can agree," she says, but she's quick to add that, while this case may be more clear-cut, seeking change through reporting is normal:

"It's just different in that we said it more outright. But I don't think I've ever done a story where I didn't wish it would lead to some outcome, even if the outcome is just 'People will be more informed about this issue.' There's always a reason that we write about stuff.

So I think it was helpful to just be really transparent about that so that we could have that as a guiding post throughout our reporting and engagement. Because we had the purpose of improving youth mental health and reducing stigma, that led us to the events that we organized around the state and tried to actually make a difference...

I think it was really helpful. There might have been a few moments with politicians who maybe felt like they were on the defensive where it maybe made things a little dicier. But for the most part, especially with families that were actually going through stuff, and advocates, I think it made it easier to explain where we were coming from. I think transparency makes journalism less extractive, just inherently. If you can be transparent with sources about what your goals are, then they can make a more educated decision about whether they want to be part of it."

Rule #4: Look for ways to give your sources some editorial control.

When Alex V. Hernandez co-founded the website 90 Days, 90 Voices in the wake of President Trump's initial travel ban, he wanted to create a place where readers could hear about the experiences of the immigrants and refugees whose lives were affected by these policy debates. But, Hernandez says, considering the life experiences of their sources, they wanted to give the sources as much editorial control as possible.

"When you're forced to migrate, when you're not leaving your country because it's something

you want to do, you're leaving because you have to, because there's a danger in your country, that whole immigrant experience is one where you give up a lot of agency," he says, joking as he explains people usually immigrate because life in their home country has become untenable. "No one ever wakes up being like, 'Hey, you know what would be great to do today? Let's do a family trip where we're all asylum-seekers.' No one ever says that, ever."

"Because that process takes away so much agency from people, when we decided to do the 90 Days, 90 Voices project, we interviewed people in that Studs Terkel oral history manner, but the whole goal was to use a transformative storytelling technique to give just a little agency back to that person in how their story is told."

So in an effort to give sources some power over their own stories, the 90 Days team allows sources discretion at various steps. Sources decide whether to include their full names. Hernandez says that, in their day jobs, he and his colleagues avoided using anonymous sources whenever possible. But they knew that their immigrant and refugees sources had a lot to lose in that political moment, and they "didn't want to throw gasoline on the fire."

At 90 Days, sources also decide if they would like to be depicted in a photo or if they would like one of a cadre of freelance artists to render them in a drawing instead. And before the story publishes, the journalist will read it back to them, allowing them to decide what to leave in or take out. Often, 90 Days reporters will use an "as told to" format in which the journalist edits an interview to create a first-person account using only the source's own words.

While the 90 Days approach may allow sources an unusual level of control, journalists for other outlets say they use some of the same practices when interviewing vulnerable sources.

"I try to be really over-communicative and clear about what's going on and give them the information about what's happening ... so that they can make decisions," says Elizabeth Van Brocklin of The Trace. "Like, 'I'm going to ask you to talk about what happened the day your son died. If

you don't want to talk about it, you let me know.' Or, 'Now I'm going to ask you about the evening you were shot. Is that OK with you?'"

Melissa Sanchez of ProPublica Illinois says she will call potentially vulnerable sources before publication to describe the framework of the story and read them their quotes, with context. She'll give them a chance to reconsider in a way that she wouldn't for a media-savvy source. If they want to change their words, "there's room for negotiation," she says.

Community organizer Alfred Marshall appreciates that journalist Katy Reckdahl gave him that same opportunity when she interviewed him.

"I said a lot of things in my interview with her, because of the anger that I had — some of the words that I used. I said some radical things," he says. "And she came back and said, 'Look, do you want me to put these things in the context of your story?' and I had to really think about some of the things I said. And some of the things I took back."

USA TODAY-Wisconsin's *Kids in Crisis* team sought to include the voices of the teenagers who were at the center of Wisconsin's youth mental health crisis, so they invited teens from across the state to share stories about their experiences with mental illness at a series of live events. But in order to ensure that the storytelling process was in the teens' best interest too, USA TODAY-Wisconsin invited facilitators from [Honest, Open, Proud](#) to lead workshops to help the teens consider the benefits and risks of disclosing their mental illnesses, anticipate others' responses, and develop a meaningful story.

Freelance writer and journalism educator Lewis Wallace advocates for allowing sources more editorial control. But, he says, power imbalances can sometimes still dictate the content. He recalls [a reporting project for radio station WYSO](#) in which he worked with prisoners at Dayton Correctional Institution to produce their own stories over the course of nine months:

"When we went in the prison, we said, 'This is your series. These are your stories. You can talk about whatever you want.' And then we realized that that

wasn't true, because we were in a prison and the warden and the people from the PR department from the state Department of Corrections actually said, 'They can talk about anything except for their crimes and their victims.'... And a lot of the women had committed crimes in self-defense, so these were their stories of abuse and trauma...

And so that in itself was really hard for me. But everybody inside of a prison is used to rules of all kinds, and so I think people were just like, 'OK, fine, whatever.' They didn't really care. Although there was tension there at points, because it's like telling people, 'You can talk about anything except for the most defining moment in your life.' So people would tell their life story up to their crime and then tell more about their story after their crime. It was a weird thing.

...The [story] series was filled with trauma and traumatic stories and things that were quite hard for the listener, but I think the point was it was the storytellers themselves who decided, 'I have a reason that I want to tell this story and I'm gonna get it out there to the world.' And it was very much... structurally in their hands to really choose that, and there was a lot time to think about and deliberate and work on their stories, and they more or less produced them themselves."

Rule #5: Use research and planning as tools of sensitivity.

Journalists who specialize in reporting on people who have been harmed have adapted a variety of techniques to inflict as little harm as possible on their sources during the process. (There are plenty of guides on interviewing victims of trauma, so I will focus here on the tips and questions that I haven't seen covered.)

Interestingly, a few journalists referred to their responsibility to "minimize harm" or do "harm reduction," borrowing language used in [public health and drug treatment contexts](#).

Rory Linnane, whose assignments for USA TODAY-Wisconsin's *Kids in Crisis* series required her to interview loved ones of young people who committed suicide, quickly learned how taxing these interviews could be for sources.

"It was stressful to do the first interviews and come to terms with what you're asking people to do," she says. In the first entry of "[Rory's Diary](#)," her first-person, behind-the-reporting columns accompanying the *Kids in Crisis* series, she wrote, "I question my place in asking them to relive their pain for our readers. I hope that it's worth it, that the stories ... move our state to action."

To minimize the harm, Linnane devised her own interview approach from trainings she received. In a standard interview, it might be fine to jump from one topic to another, but she says that's not the right approach for a more sensitive subject. Before a sensitive interview, she carefully plans the progression of her questions so that the person "only has to go to the hard place once" — for example, so that a parent only has to recall the specifics of their child's death once in the interview. She also tries to plan the questions such that the interview will end on a positive note.

Other reporters mentioned ways they strive to minimize harm. Melissa Sanchez says she watches her source's reactions and will make arrangements to finish an interview on a later day if the questions seem to be upsetting them. And if the source seems not to be fully comprehending the interview, she'll cut it short to avoid interviewing someone who isn't completely aware of what's going on.

Filmmaker and writer Jade Begay, who advocates for better coverage of Indigenous communities, cites some ways to change the reporting process to enable more thoughtful, less extractive coverage.

First, she says, spend time. When she worked for [Indigenous Rising Media](#) during the Standing Rock protests, it was her job to help visiting journalists cover the unfolding story. But, she says, she found the journalists' short weekend reporting trips didn't promote trust or allow for thorough coverage.

And it's not just about the time one spends on the ground reporting. Begay says it's also about dedicating the space needed to tell the story well, be that through a series or a follow-up, rather than "one-and-done" reporting.

Rule # 6: Address your sources' information gaps appropriately.

Often, when we're reporting on the harms a community has experienced, we're reporting about, not for, the people who have experienced that harm. Disaster reporting aside, little reporting is focused on addressing the practical information needs of people or communities in crisis. But several journalists told me that, as they went about their reporting, they encountered opportunities to bridge sources' information gaps, if only in small ways.

Through her beat covering gunshot survivors for [The Trace](#), Elizabeth Van Brocklin learned about victim compensation funds — funds set up by states to reimburse victims or their families for costs like medical care or funeral expenses. But as she spoke with survivors, she learned that many never apply for the funds, in some cases because they don't know the funds exist.

Van Brocklin recalls talking by phone with a survivor in New Orleans who told her, "They don't do that in New Orleans."

"I was like, 'OK, this needs to go in [the story](#), because somebody who might benefit from this is under the impression that this resource doesn't even exist for him, or for anyone in his city, and that needs to be clear that there's this level of misunderstanding.' But I also then need to tell [him], 'Actually, this does exist and I want you to know that.' I'm not trying to trick him or keep him in the dark. That's not fair."

She found herself sending information to other survivors who didn't know about the funds either.

"I can't help them fill out the application. I can't guide them through it like a social worker maybe could, but I can send them information about where to apply," Van Brocklin says. The questions also prompted her to write a second, [how-to-style story](#) intended to help survivors navigate the compensation fund system.

Rory Linnane found herself in a similar situation as she interviewed people about mental illness

for USA TODAY-Wisconsin's *Kids in Crisis* series.

"If someone reaches out to me and they're struggling, which happens, I will try to give them all the phone numbers that they can call to get help," says Linnane. "And I think that's something that not only is OK to do but that we should do."

But Terry Parris Jr., former ProPublica engagement editor, offers a caution: Avoid recommending a specific provider. As journalists, we don't know enough to recommend one provider over another, and a specific recommendation could put the journalist on the hook if the person has a bad experience, he says.

Instead, he recommends that journalists address information gaps in the way we know best: by writing articles, like Van Brocklin did.

Rule # 7: When relevant, report on solutions.

Another way reporters can serve those they cover: Report on potential solutions to the harms they're facing. The Trace's Elizabeth Van Brocklin says, after spending three years telling the stories of people who have been shot and survived, she's pivoting to [reporting on solutions full-time](#). She thinks she fulfilled her original goal, helping her outlet and audience really understand what survivors go through. But, she says, after so much time immersed in the subject, she experienced second-hand trauma responses. Now, she will report on how survivors find ways to cope and [the approaches that might prevent such tragedies in the future](#).

The USA TODAY-Wisconsin *Kids in Crisis* team saw that promise too, choosing to report on ways Wisconsin might combat its youth mental health crisis by hiring more school counselors and incentivizing more psychiatrists to work in rural areas. The team even hosted suicide prevention trainings throughout the state. Reporter Rory Linnane says solutions reporting offers impacted communities something new.

"They tend to already know what the problem is, so having tools and ideas about solutions to that

problem I think can be empowering,” Linnane says.

And she says, there’s a second benefit.

“For people who are not necessarily the affected community but may have power in the situation, it shows them and people who hold them accountable that it’s possible to do better,” she says, “so they can’t just wash their hands of it and say, ‘Yes, this really is a problem, but we can’t do anything about it.’”

Rule # 8: Follow up.

Once we get what we need from a source — an interview, a document, a photo — it’s not long before we’re on to the next source, and soon, the next story. It takes conscious effort to follow up, and it’s not always clear when or how we should.

Of course, many reporters will contact a source to confirm their quotes or to let them know when the story will publish. Rory Linnane, formerly of USA TODAY-Wisconsin, says she’ll offer to read the whole story to more vulnerable sources.

Melissa Sanchez of ProPublica Illinois says with those kinds of sources, she tries to take an extra step after publication. Realizing that seeing one’s story in print can be startling, especially if it’s a painful story, she likes to call them after the story has published to see how they’re doing.

For Elizabeth Van Brocklin of The Trace, calling sources after publication has made her realize just how deeply some stories impact the source. She recalls [a podcast episode she co-produced about two friends](#) who together survived the Las Vegas mass shooting. When she called one of the two after the story, that woman mentioned that her friend hadn’t yet been able to bring herself to listen.

And Van Brocklin’s relationship with her sources often extends well past publication.

“I try not to have a transactional relationship,” she says. As she continues her work, she sends them stories that she thinks might interest them. But especially important are the anniversaries.

As Van Brocklin began interviewing shooting survivors, she learned that, for a person who’s been shot, the anniversary of the event is often a very meaningful — and very difficult — day. She tries to keep track of the anniversaries of her sources and send them a message on that day.

Terry Parris Jr., who until recently led the engagement team at ProPublica, says that making sure the reporting makes it back to the affected communities is a key principle of good engagement work. When his team is working on an investigation, they might receive responses from a few thousand sources sharing their stories. It’s his team’s responsibility to keep those sources in the loop about the progress of the investigation, including sending them each story as it publishes.

Filmmaker Jade Begay says good follow-up is also about doing follow-up reporting, watching for opportunities to continue the coverage in the future. She says she makes sure her sources have her direct line so they can contact her if there’s a future event they think she should cover.

Community organizer Alfred Marshall can vouch for the value of continued reporting, noting it was reporter Katy Reckdahl’s follow-through that defined her reporting on his group’s efforts.

“I take my hat off to her, because she was there the whole way,” he says. “She was always there... She didn’t miss a meeting... It made a difference...”

Rule # 9: Give something back.

Among the hard-and-fast journalism ethics rules is the prohibition on paying sources. But the journalists I talked to acknowledged that sources often make sacrifices in order to share their stories with journalists, and several of those journalists have looked for ways to directly or indirectly give something meaningful back to the source or their community.

Step one, they say: Recognize the source’s contribution. Filmmaker Jade Begay says she often sees journalists, especially those from larger outlets, act as if they are giving the

source something by listening to them, without appreciating what the source is giving them:

“I think there’s all kinds of ways that we can... [come] from a place of gratitude, of understanding that someone’s story is not something to be just taken and extracted and then shared with the world... Especially if we’re doing storytelling on something that’s really vulnerable or really sensitive, someone who’s experiencing some sort of crisis or environmental disaster or whose community is under attack... their sharing the story with you as a journalist is actually a huge act of vulnerability, so even just coming with that understanding that what people are sharing is really important and it’s an honor to receive that.”

Rory Linnane, who reported the *Kids in Crisis* series for USA TODAY-Wisconsin, agrees.

“I don’t want to assume that someone sharing their story with me is going to be more helpful to them than it is to the audience. I think overall they’re giving something by spending the time with you and by making themselves so vulnerable in the public eye... I think it’s important to start from that point where you realize that they’re giving something. And so I guess my main goal from there is to make sure that if they’re sharing the story that I truly believe that it’s going to have a positive impact, and I work as much as I can to do that, and that I am minimizing harm to them as much as possible.”

Sometimes, says Linnane, the interview itself might have that positive impact, providing the source an opportunity to be truly heard.

“I think a lot of times interviews can be very therapeutic for people if they’re handled right, especially people who are grieving loss and haven’t been able to talk about their loved one in a while or haven’t felt like anyone’s — you know, a lot of the time people are scared to ask people who are grieving, and so they’re kind of relieved to be able to talk about it and feel like it’s doing something good. And I think, especially for students, I think it can be this really powerful step in accepting themselves as the world accepts them... It can be a really important confidence builder.”

Independent journalist Lewis Wallace recalls receiving a message from a source who said that “being listened to was like a gift from God,” but he adds that that feeling depends on seeing their story accurately reflected, and it isn’t universal.

Alejandro Fernández points out that while sources might benefit emotionally from sharing their stories, journalists benefit from those stories in a much more concrete way. He recalls making calls to immigrants locked in debt to a bond company for [a story on the company’s questionable practices](#):

“We [the journalists] were pretty sure we had an interesting story and that at least our editor was happy with it, and we were happy because we were going to do a podcast with Radio Ambulante, so we know that professionally, we are doing something interesting. And in other cases maybe we had some good clicks ... and we had a good response. Those are more concrete results that I don’t think that the vulnerable people, the victim, is going to see. And that is very weird.

And that is like an unfair way, an unfair agreement. Because we have the minimum thing that we are going to get, but they don’t. They can even get in trouble when they expose their stories. And so it is unfair. I know it is unfair. And I don’t know how to solve this.”

Recognizing this, a few journalists mentioned ways they had tried to compensate sources non-monetarily for their time and hardship. After working with inmates for months to produce their own radio stories, Lewis Wallace wrote letters of recommendation for the amateur producers.

“The radio station I worked at was pretty traditional in terms of journalism ethics, and so there was definitely a line where we wouldn’t have, for example, paid people ... [Writing the letters] was just sort of an idea that I had. I thought, ‘Well, they went through this class and they produced these things and I was their editor, and I would write a letter of recommendation for any other community producer who I’d worked with. These community producers are in prison and right now they don’t have the use for a letter of recommendation, but

maybe in the future they would, so wouldn't that be a nice thing to do for them? You know, a way to show them that we appreciated their work, which they were essentially producing free content for our station."

Rory Linnane, knowing her young sources would be applying to college soon, offered to serve as a reference. She says some of the young adults wrote about the experience in their college application essays. And for some of the sources, the opportunity to share their story publicly in an outlet reaching audiences statewide helped them find other speaking engagement or activism opportunities.

But Jade Begay says journalists shouldn't rule out the idea of making material offerings to sources, though for those working in traditional newsrooms, this one is still non-negotiable. Begay, herself Indigenous and a former senior producer of [Indigenous Rising Media](#) favors giving her sources small, meaningful offerings as a sign of reciprocity. When she interviews members of another tribe, for example, she tries to find out what they use to pray — tobacco, for example — and brings that as token of appreciation. In other cases, she'll use her photography skills to take headshots that she shares with the source for their own use.

But, she says, she thinks journalists and media makers should consider paying sources directly:

"Even in documentary films, you can't pay your characters. I know why that exists, but I find it so hard because people are offering something. They're offering time, and if your documentary is about somebody's struggle, you know they're going through a hard time, that they're struggling. So how can we shift the assumption that just because we're offering someone compensation for their time [means] that we're having them say the things we want them to say? Can we just trust somebody's story? I think there's a lot of unlearning and relearning in those questions. In both film and journalism worlds, we have to take deep looks at why those things exist."

Lewis Wallace agrees:

"On a more personal level, I'm open to discussions of compensating people, especially where they are stepping up into a more co-production role... I think the line between 'I'm a professional journalist and you're a source' is kind of arbitrary... And if we're really doing the work to try to do that harm reduction and address the power dynamic between journalists and sources, then those questions should come up, and that's healthy and they should be engaged and not just shut down."

Community organizer Alfred Marshall, who organizes people struggling to find jobs, says the opportunity to make a little money for being interviewed would be a welcome change. He's been interviewed regularly and has also helped journalists connect with other members of his community. He argues that compensating sources for their stories would acknowledge the source's need, recognize the value of their contribution and justify the risk they're taking by telling their story.

"Sometimes that be a flag on your back: 'Don't hire him' or 'Don't trust him, he's a person that like to talk.' Now you riding around with that on your back, that you're a guy that speak out ... It kinda haunt you because that clipping is gonna be there," he says.

Marshall recalls something that happened at a backpack giveaway event he organized through his nonprofit after-school program, [Us Helping Us](#). In New Orleans, all public schools require students to wear uniforms, and buying those uniforms can be a major financial burden for struggling families, so, in addition to giving away 150 backpacks of school supplies, Marshall's group raffled off 25 \$75 gift cards for families to buy uniforms. But, he says, those who didn't get gift cards were upset.

"I took two of those angry mothers and I asked a reporter to come in and tell their story, how the school system is not supporting them in getting uniforms and how these young women are struggling to get the uniforms. So the reporter did the story, they aired it, but the lady still struggles. Nobody came and said, 'OK, I'm gonna help you get these uniforms.' ... [but] the reporter in some kind of way was able to connect her with some

other agency... that came through to help the lady out to get two uniforms.

So if it's not a direct [payment] from them, it should be a connection where it would ease the burden on one after telling these stories, because I'm telling you my story because I'm hurting and I need support. I'm looking for help, that's why I'm giving you my story... Like the people on the border seeking asylum. They're seeking safety, freedom. And that's why people tell their stories."

Before our conversation, Marshall wasn't familiar with the prohibition against paying sources. He argues that if the journalist seeks sources through a trusted member of the community — "someone that's hearing the cries of the people on a daily basis" — the monetary transaction won't compromise the interview.

But, says Marshall, monetary compensation is only a short-term solution:

"The paycheck is, 'Change my condition.' When I'm telling my story, I want to see a change happen. And it just don't come with me getting a little money for my story, but it's a big picture thing, meaning that the system need to change itself and reward people. And that's the change and that's the paycheck that people really look for. "

This, says Rory Linnane, is the kind of outcome her USA TODAY-Wisconsin team was looking for with their *Kids in Crisis* series, and they got it. Then-Superintendent Tony Evers at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, citing inspiration from the *Kids in Crisis* series, created a major mental health funding plan, and much of it was approved in the last budget cycle. Linnane also notes that Hopeline, the text-in crisis helpline that Linnane's team included with its stories, reports seeing an increase in texts each time a story runs.

"And, in general, I think it's just led to bringing down stigma and starting more conversations about mental health," she says, noting that the community events they held across the state trained more than 100 people in suicide prevention approaches and offered information on local resources.

Rule # 10: Know what you and your outlet bring to the table (for better or worse).

To figure out who your story serves or how it might lead to change for the community you're covering, it helps to understand the outlet you're working for. What impact does the outlet seek to have, and who is the outlet's main audience?

When Alex V. Hernandez co-founded [90 Days, 90 Voices](#), he says he and his colleagues weren't aiming their stories at people like their sources. Instead, they wanted to "amplify their voices" and share them with people who might not otherwise have a window into the immigrant or refugee experience.

"I think the real goal for us is to really enlighten and inform someone who maybe only sees immigration through a cable talking head," Hernandez says.

They hoped to offer those people a different kind of immigration coverage.

"Instead of focusing on the legal, Byzantine rule process — the way I see it, a publication like Vox, with their explainers, they can do that way better than we can," he says. "What we can do is... put that into additional context. Like here's one person's experience going through [the immigration process at the border] and this is why they went through that."

Alejandro Fernández, meanwhile, was looking to create a different sort of coverage when he — along with hundreds of other top journalists from Latin America and Spain — was hired to help build Univision's investigative capacity. In his role as a data journalist, he investigated the seemingly-arbitrary nature of [asylum court rulings](#) and [immigration bond amounts](#), and reported on an [immigration bond company](#) accused of fraud and abuse. He believes their findings should have prompted policy change or public outrage.

But Fernández, who lost his job in a [major layoff in 2018](#), says that Univision wasn't set up to have the larger impact he hoped the stories would have. He says the network is trusted by

immigrants but isn't respected by policymakers, so its coverage doesn't tend to change policy. His editors told him that wasn't what Univision did.

"In our meetings, that was also said by our big boss, 'We have no [impact] in the political agenda in the United States.'... And sometimes we... get in partnerships [with] the American traditional media, and they don't really take us seriously. I remember some investigations that they really didn't want to work with us. And I know why, because in investigative journalism, Univision has nothing to offer. The Univision brand is not a reliable brand in that specific type of journalism."

Fernández says that Univision excels at connecting with immigrant audiences and sources opened up to him for that reason. And he's glad that his reporting may have reached people who could use it — for example, he says he would be happy if even just one immigrant avoided debt by opting not to sign a contract with that bond company. He says that if those stories had run in The New York Times or ProPublica instead, they might never have been seen by immigrants.

But, he says, "that second thing is not as important as the first."

"Sometimes you have to write for those who make decisions. And those who make decisions are not the undocumented immigrants. And so, from the New York Times, the decision-makers can read you. And from ProPublica also, and the Washington Post..."

If [immigrants] have to make daily decisions with your information, maybe they will find Univision more useful. But if you are dealing with structural problems, it might be more important if your articles are read by decision-makers....I think that the undocumented immigrant really considers your tips, like how to have some legal cautions in something specific regarding your situation in the States... but these decision-makers in Washington, D.C. — they don't really care about Univision.

It is basically because we care about this emotional journalism, making people cry, confronting Trump in a press conference, that kind of show. [Univision] are experts in that. But they are not experts in this

other kind of journalism we are talking about. And so sometimes it is more important for us to be read by and taken seriously by these influential people, rather than just being read and taken seriously by undocumented immigrants, if our objective is to make a change."

Aware of their own limitations, some outlets are connecting with new audiences by teaming up with other outlets. The Trace, a website exclusively covering guns, gun policy and gun violence, knows its niche well.

"We are the only outlet that's covering this full time," says staff reporter Elizabeth Van Brocklin, noting that The Trace's primary audience is "people who are professionally related to the issue."

But for many projects, The Trace has [partnered with local outlets](#) to find local sources and to share those stories with a local audience. (Disclosure: I previously worked for one of those outlets, Listening Post New Orleans, and worked on one of those [collaborative projects](#).)

"We're trying to keep it community-oriented where we can," says Van Brocklin.

ProPublica and ProPublica Illinois take that idea to another scale entirely. Not only do they do collaborative investigations with a [massive list of other outlets](#) — including such varied outlets as The Fresno Bee, NPR, and City Bureau — they also make their stories available for any outlet to re-publish for free. This lets their work be seen by the variety of audiences.

In her own work, says ProPublica Illinois reporter Melissa Sanchez, she targets specific audiences:

"We've been doing lots of stuff around ticketing in Chicago and how it drives people into bankruptcy — black people. So the primary audience, maybe, is not necessarily a poor black family on the South Side of Chicago. If we get to them, there's really, really good value in that. They can see themselves in the story, they can identify, and they can feel less alone in this really [terrible] situation. That's a good thing, but I think the point is... the system is really inequitable.

So who has the power to change the system? It's like

aldermen, the mayor, the organizations and individuals who lobby the city, who can exert political pressure on the city to make change... I don't think I go into a story thinking, 'I want my audience to be the 50 aldermen of Chicago,' but in a way, that's some of the people who could have impact around the issue."

But Sanchez says partnering with other outlets allows the stories to reach new audiences in forms that fit them. Another outlet might shorten the story, create a video or audio form, or localize the information to their audience, like when Al Jazeera used the findings of their Chicago ticketing investigation to create a [video](#) explaining bankruptcy.

"They made it more catchy... really down-to-Earth and fun. Which was weird, to make something so dense fun," Sanchez says. "They took our information and did something else with it to make it more accessible to a different kind of audience."

"We don't have sole ownership of this horrible story that we're writing about. Anybody can write about it," she says, adding that ProPublica Illinois has a [communications manager](#) tasked with sending their stories to organizations and outlets whose constituencies might be interested.

And, Sanchez says, some of this is her own job. She says she spends significant chunks of her time sharing the stories with other audiences by going on black radio or Spanish-language television to talk about an investigation. And ProPublica tries to make its own work available in a variety of forms — such as bite-sized articles and [short videos](#) — to meet a variety of needs. For example, when she investigated the conditions within [Chicago's shelters for immigrant children](#), she knew she would need to take extra steps to get the reporting in front of the relevant audiences:

"We wanted people to know in Spanish too because so many Latino families are connected to immigrants and maybe immigrants who've gone through the [immigrant youth shelter] system. And so to get to that audience, we translate the stories, which makes it easier for people to consume them. But what's even more valuable is we try to get the stories out in their own language by my going

on TV and radio... for little quick bites."

It's not like a 5,000 word story... but it's more powerful in that it's seen by more people. People like my mom. My mom will never read my stories. My mom will never read my stories in English or in Spanish. It's just too dense. [Laughs] But she will watch TV and she'll see a two-minute piece with some interview with me and some B-roll and some contact. And I think it's a good starting point to get people aware.... So they don't have to commit to reading the whole damn thing.

Rule # 11: Get ready to think big picture.

As I've already implied, some of the people I interviewed questioned whether we can really do ethical journalism if we hold onto all the traditional journalism norms. Filmmaker Jade Begay, who is herself working on creating a guide to less-extractive journalism, says doing our work more ethically will take more than a few small tweaks:

"What I thought I was presenting as, 'Here's what we're going to do to decolonize media and decolonize our approach' turned into like, oh my gosh, we are actually needing to do some deep work around the ways we've internalized — and I mean we as in every individual in America — white supremacy in America and some of the stereotypes... and even the sense of entitlement that privileged people have, especially if you've gone through some sort of higher education or if you work with a really notable outlet... [or] because of [your] access, and how we show up with that in our work..."

So, for me, that process was like, OK, we are actually having to do some deep work around relearning our entire approach not just in our work but in how we are relating to people who are marginalized or communities that we are outsiders of, yet we feel entitlement to cover that story — that we're doing them the favor... And also this savior mentality, and working with that.

And so what I've learned is there's actually a lot of behaviors and patterns that need to be addressed in doing this. It's not as surface-level as we would hope, and it's not as easy as we would hope. It's actually deep process and inner work and working with our assumptions and the things we might take for granted."

For example, Begay says, when journalists covered the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, they focused on the “victim narrative” instead of reporting on the history of treaty rights and the ways they’ve been violated, a type of reporting she thinks would have been more helpful.

Independent journalist Alejandro Fernández says even the way he and others think about their sources — especially undocumented immigrants — as “vulnerable people” is problematic:

“I can accept that when I say ‘vulnerable people’ I am speaking in a superiority term, that I feel that I am not vulnerable, but we usually see immigrants like this: Vulnerable people who need protection and who can’t make smart decisions unless we help them. And that is really bad, and I accept that also that is present in our newsroom and almost everyone who is not an undocumented immigrant sees them like this.”

Another concern many of the journalists I spoke to shared: the power dynamics inherent to journalism. Fernández worries that, with journalists in a privileged position, “It is very easy to use these people.”

Elizabeth Van Brocklin of The Trace points out that the journalist makes the key decisions.

“In small ways, I try to hand them some agency, but ultimately I’m going to spend hours with them on the phone and then boil down what they say into the narrative I’m trying to tell,” she says. “There’s like a thousand details I could choose from and I get to pick three details to try to portray that person and their experience... and I don’t really see a way around that.”

Independent journalist Lewis Wallace notes that reporters and sources usually have different — sometimes conflicting — interests.

“And so it can be a form of, if not exploitation, then at least extraction — taking someone else’s story and using it for not necessarily their interest but for the interest either of the journalist or of the journalist’s audience,” says Wallace.

New Orleans community organizer Alfred

Marshall has been observing this dynamic for years. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Marshall has frequently been interviewed or helped journalists connect with others to interview:

“After Katrina, people from around the world came in, wanted to hear people’s stories [of] what was Katrina like. [I was] telling the story over and over...and just putting the story out there. And, you know, I know it’s good to put the story out there. I feel like it’d be helpful when you do that, expose it to the world. But, in return — you know, the world been got the message, but...you don’t get nothing back from your story. And it has been constantly — over and over and over people get the stories, but [the people on the ground] we don’t see the fruits of that.”

Lewis Wallace would like to instead see journalism that “considers the needs and desires of that community.” But, he says, that might require changing the structure of the news business.

“Right now national media functions the way it does because stories are being sold — or advertising is being sold — and you make more money selling them to a larger audience. The business model incentivizes lots of eyeballs on a story...and I want us to think broadly and imaginatively about what if the whole media economy was different and it was local people collectives or cooperatives who were owning the radio station or the paper... that dynamic inherently changes whose interests are being met.”

“I think that right now it’s the economic structure that’s driving the ethical approach,” Wallace told me as we wrapped up our conversation. “And so to the extent that we can sort of flip that and say, ‘What would really be the most ethical way or the right way to produce these stories and then how can we financially support that?’ I think that’s kind of the animating the question for me.”

I repeated Wallace’s idea back to him.

“Yeah,” he laughed, aware of what he’s asking for. “So let’s, like, find the person who can answer that, and we’ll be done.”

Rule #12: Ask the hard questions. (If you're in doubt, you're in good company.)

Far and away, the biggest takeaway from this project is not a do-this or don't-do-that. It's not something to say in your interviews or a way to talk to your editor, though those things are all important. It's the comfort of knowing that, if you're worrying about these things and wishing you had someone to talk to, you're not alone.

Every journalist I called took at least half an hour out of their day to talk with me about these ethical questions. Some of our conversations went on for an hour.

Why? Because most of us don't ask these questions out in the open.

"I think that your research question is very, very helpful and very interesting," independent journalist Alejandro Fernández told me. "I don't think journalists talk about this, you know? In public. Usually we go to a bar and we speak with our colleagues about how we feel and after that no one speaks that in public."

But that doesn't mean they're not thinking about it. To the contrary, every journalist I spoke to told me they wonder regularly about questions like whether their approach is extractive and what it means to have an ethical relationship with sources.

"If you really care about these people, it would be really weird if you didn't feel this," Fernández told me. "I think it's very natural." But, he says, he hopes he's having a positive impact. "We don't have money... the only thing I can do is tell their stories."

Elizabeth Van Brocklin agreed:

"For me, this is a total existential crisis, and I think it's important to reflect on whether stories benefit the communities they feature. I think it's scary when people don't think about these things and when they assume that like, 'People love to tell their stories and that's enough.' I think that's a part of it, but I don't think that

should keep you from scrutinizing the value of what you're doing to everyone that's involved...

Sometimes I wonder, 'Should I be doing this?' I am a white woman from an upper-middle class background and many of the people I interview are from low-resource communities and they have experienced multiple traumas, and may not have trust in journalists. That's a longstanding power dynamic, and I feel responsible to be as up front and sensitive to it as I can.

Is it extractive? Yes, I think it is. But... if the alternative is nobody doing it, then I think it's worth doing... We are the only outlet that's covering gun violence and gun policy full-time, and we're a really small staff and I can't do anything about my life experiences, so I just try to do my best, I guess. I'm aware of these dynamics and I try to not be naive to them, but I also just try to do a fair, good story, and I feel like that's better than no story.

I think I have a huge responsibility to the people who I interview... But the question is, 'To do what?'... I think this an area that needs hard questions asked... I think probably to some degree this is just part of this job, and we can always get better and work on making it more fair. But I think it's just an inherently blurry profession."

As I wrap up, I'd like acknowledge that this guide is by no means comprehensive. If it has left you with more questions than answers, that's understandable, as producing it has left me with questions too. But I hope you might now feel a bit more comfortable starting conversations about these questions, or making more public the conversations you've been having privately.

If you have questions or comments, or if you have ideas for ways to continue this conversation, please feel free to email me at ncyahr@gmail.com.

Interviewees

Jade Begay is independent artist, filmmaker, and media trainer. Previously, she worked as a senior producer for [Indigenous Rising Media](#), a media project of the Indigenous Environmental Network designed to give indigenous people a platform to tell their own stories without outside editorial influence. She also provides internal trainings for news outlets on how to cover communities ethically.

Elizabeth Van Brocklin is a staff reporter for [The Trace](#), a news website focused exclusively on guns, gun policy, and gun violence. For three years, she reported the stories of those who get shot and survive in the [Shot and Forgotten](#) series. That series has now mostly wrapped up and she's shifting her focus to writing solutions-focused stories like [this one](#) about Philadelphia's unusual but effective policy that the first police on the scene take a gunshot victim to a hospital rather than wait for an ambulance.

Alejandro Fernández Sanabria is a freelance reporter from Costa Rica. He previously worked as a data reporter for Univision, where he investigated U.S. immigration courts, including the arbitrary nature of [asylum rulings](#) and [immigration bonds](#).

Alex V. Hernandez is co-founder and engagement director of [90 Days, 90 Voices](#), which "tells the stories of those seeking a home in the United States during an age of unrest through personal narratives, audio, photography, comics, and live journalism events." He is also the Lincoln Square, North Center and Irving Park reporter for [Block Club Chicago](#).

Rory Linnane is a reporter for the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's Ideas Lab](#). When I spoke with her, she was a special projects reporter for USA TODAY-Wisconsin. For the last three years, she has worked on the [Kids in Crisis](#) series about Wisconsin's youth mental health crisis. For that series, her team took a decidedly non-neutral approach, declaring the state's youth suicide numbers were unacceptable and calling for change. For the project, she took the unusual step of publishing a "[diary](#)" in which she shared her feelings and hopes about the reporting.

Alfred Marshall is a longtime organizer in New Orleans, La. He works for the [New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice](#) as an organizer of the membership group Stand With Dignity, and he recently co-founded [Us Helping Us](#), a nonprofit after-school center. He has been interviewed many times by local and outside outlets, both about his work and about his personal life — his son was killed by gun violence in 2013.

Terry Parris Jr. is the engagement director at [The City](#). When I spoke with him, he was deputy editor of engagement for ProPublica, where he led a team at the forefront of the field of engagement reporting. He has overseen the engagement work that powered investigations like [Reliving Agent Orange](#), about health impacts of Agent Orange exposure and [Lost Mothers](#), about maternal mortality, and he has [written](#) and presented on the approaches his team has used. Notably, he says his work focuses on connecting with the "right community" (those who have been directly impacted) rather than the largest community.

Melissa Sanchez is a reporter for [ProPublica Illinois](#), where she has investigated the [conditions within Chicago's shelters for immigrant children](#) and the [disproportionate ticketing of Chicago's black residents](#).

Lewis Wallace is an [independent journalist](#) who speaks and writes about journalism as an extractive industry. He is the author of the forthcoming book ["The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity,"](#) due out in October.

Further Reading

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