



A GUIDE TO
**ETHICAL &
ANTI-RACIST
STORYTELLING**

NEON *Nexus for
EQUITY +
OPPORTUNITY
Nationwide*

INTRODUCTION

Nexus for Equity + Opportunity Nationwide (NEON) is a cohort of nine U.S. community foundations working together to dismantle structural and systemic racism and achieve equity in social and economic mobility in their communities.

As they pursue this critical work, cohort members are re-examining their operations to ensure they are supporting their communities through anti-racist practices that confront the entrenched structures and systems that reinforce racial inequity.

That examination includes communications and storytelling—and has led the foundations to embrace a narrative change framework that replaces storytelling approaches that perpetuate stereotypes and bias with those that mirror and reinforce a more equitable vision for their communities. Each of the NEON foundations is also closely examining every aspect of its storytelling process to ensure that the resulting communications and content align with the group's values.

This effort has also emphasized a review of emerging best practices in ethical storytelling—a process that has led to the creation of this guide, which provides a praxis for content creators at community foundations and other organizations as they commit to telling stories in ethical, anti-racist, and inclusive ways.

This guide provides a praxis for foundations to tell stories in ethical, anti-racist, and inclusive ways.

RETHINKING THE WAY WE TELL STORIES

As community foundations that are dedicated to dismantling structural and systemic racism and achieving equity in social and economic mobility, we have a responsibility to ensure that we are adhering to anti-racist principles in everything we do.

This includes how we tell our stories—and how we depict the people whose stories we tell.

Our institutions have historically worked within a larger, entrenched system that can reinforce racist power dynamics—dynamics that have, in turn, influenced how we communicate. Indeed, many of the communications and marketing professionals who work at community foundations have gained experience through roles in journalism or marketing, where these dynamics often exist unchecked and largely unexamined.

Those who have worked in journalism have been trained in an infrastructure that relies on reporters, photographers, and videographers covering and telling stories through interviews, research, and observation; sending those stories through the editing process; and then distributing them through print and electronic media outlets.

A similar ecosystem exists within organizations that develop and distribute content for a range of purposes, such as promoting products and services, driving deeper audience engagement, raising awareness, and inspiring action.

While these systems have experienced disruption with the advent of social media and self-publishing platforms that allow for largely unfiltered content, they remain a primary source for mass-distributed information. And they traditionally hold a lot of power.



“Every communications opportunity is a chance to advance a positive vision, to lift up solutions, and to articulate the changes you are working toward. Foundations in the NEON cohort often articulate a vision for their community that emphasizes concepts like unity, prosperity, and

equity for all individuals. Painting a picture of the future that your institution would like to see for members of the community helps prepare people to think collectively about the issues and solutions that you are asking them to care about.”

*Frameworks
June 2022*

RETHINKING THE WAY WE TELL STORIES

Like all systems, they are governed to a large extent by traditional practices, established norms and habits, and activities that are passed from one generation to the next. When it comes to telling the stories of people of color, this raises questions on a range of issues:

Community foundations, with their deep relationships with local nonprofits, are in a unique position to provide insights in how stories are told.

- How have these systems institutionalized telling the stories of people of color?
 - How prevalent is the concept of the “White savior” in how stories are framed and told?
 - Do established storytelling practices provide a full and accurate representation of those whose stories are being told?
 - Is there implicit bias in the information-gathering and storytelling processes?
- Have all individuals who are asked to share their stories been provided with enough information and context to fully understand the potential benefits and ramifications of sharing their stories?

One way to begin to explore these questions is by assessing who is telling the stories. Traditionally, and currently, in the United States it is predominantly White people who are producing content.

In fact, according to the most recent demographic data from Zippia, every role within the storytelling ecosystem is predominantly held by White people.

That includes:

- **66.8% PERCENT OF JOURNALISTS**, compared with 6.4% Black, 12.6% Hispanic or Latino, 9.6% Asian, and 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native.

- **67% OF PR PROFESSIONALS AND COMMUNICATION SPECIALISTS**, compared with 10% Black and 11.9% Hispanic or Latino, 5.3% Asian, and 0.7% American Indian and Alaska Native.
- **65% OF PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHERS** compared with 6.3% Black, 15% Hispanic or Latino, 7% Asian, and 0.03% American Indian or Alaska Native.

That relatively few people of color participate in developing, writing, producing, and distributing content underscores the urgency of creating guidelines that can raise awareness about implicit racism. People need to understand that certain practices and approaches can perpetuate inaccurate and harmful racial stereotypes and assumptions.

The following code of ethics and guidelines offer a starting point toward identifying and avoiding long-held, often unexamined, harmful storytelling practices; the goal is to provide storytellers with the information and insights necessary to tell stories in ways that treat and portray those sharing their stories in ethical and empathetic ways while avoiding introducing bias or stereotypes into content.

Community foundations, with their deep relationships with local nonprofits, are in a unique position to demonstrate leadership and greater awareness in how stories are told and how, when, and for how long they are used to achieve specific goals.

It is the hope of the NEON cohort that these guidelines serve as an ongoing resource to help content creators and decision-makers identify and avoid systemic storytelling practices that could be harmful to those involved while furthering inaccurate stereotypes.

ETHICAL & ANTI-RACIST STORYTELLING CODE OF ETHICS

Five Principles of Ethical Storytelling



1. FIRST, DO NO HARM

Make sure the potential benefit of telling a story does not come at the expense of those whose stories are being told. Always respect sources, and use professional judgment to assess whether sharing an individual's story or identity could put them at risk or cause undue harm. Be careful to avoid preconceived notions, stereotypes, or some traditional storytelling approaches that further stereotypes or present a "White savior" framework.

2. OPERATE WITH TRANSPARENCY

Be upfront and clear about why an individual is being interviewed, what the purpose of the story is, and how and where it will be presented and promoted.

3. PRESENT AN ACCURATE REPRESENTATION

Do not embellish or manipulate copy, images, or videos in ways that do not fully or accurately portray the perspective or circumstances of a source being featured.

4. ESTABLISH A CONSISTENT, EFFICIENT, AND FAIR REVIEW PROCESS

Develop a standardized approach to reviewing content that clarifies how and when content will be reviewed and the role of the reviewer. Create guidelines for negotiating changes beyond factual corrections. Ideally, enlist a diverse team of potential reviewers who can provide their unique insights and perspectives.

5. DON'T ASSUME A STORY CAN BE REPURPOSED INDEFINITELY

Create a policy that addresses reuse and repurposing of existing content, including a limit on the time for which the content can be used without additional approval. Share this policy with those being interviewed for full transparency.

ETHICAL & ANTI-RACIST STORYTELLING GUIDELINES

STORY DEVELOPMENT/ PRE-INTERVIEW

Ask the “why?” Prior to pursuing a story, clearly define what you aim to achieve and why interviews with specific sources will help achieve that goal. Once you have established a clear sense of purpose, consider the following when identifying those to be interviewed:

- Will interviewing this individual inflict any undue harm or put them at potential risk?
- Does the individual to be interviewed have the full capacity to understand the potential ramifications for sharing their story?
- Are there any special considerations/ accommodations necessary to effectively conduct an interview (i.e., translator, presence of parent or social service representative)?
- An explanation needs to be provided about why we want to interview this subject.
- Does the story have the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes around race, gender, or sexual orientation?
- Will those contributing to the story be compensated? See “[Compensation considerations](#).”

INTERVIEW

Explain why the subject has been chosen to be interviewed, emphasizing why their story and perspective is unique and important.

- Share the purpose of the story, as well as where and how it will be used, and answer any questions the source might have before photographing, filming, or recording.
- Ask the source if they wish to be named or identified, and act according to their wishes.
- Clarify images and messages with the full understanding, participation, and permission of the constituent or the constituent’s legal guardian.
- If the interview takes an unexpected turn, explain why you are pursuing a new line of questioning and how it will benefit the story.
- Honor an interviewee’s request for specific information to be off the record.
- Explain the review process.
- After explaining the interview process, ask the source to sign a consent form acknowledging permission to use their story and photographs/videos of them.

ETHICAL & ANTI-RACIST STORYTELLING GUIDELINES

STORY DEVELOPMENT AND WRITING

- Understand your role: Unlike traditional journalism, your priorities should focus on telling the story in a way that considers the best interests of the source being featured.
- Prior to writing, give considerable thought to how your story will be structured and framed, with particular emphasis on avoiding conventions that further racial or other stereotypes or assumptions.
- Make an informed decision on whether the source should be identified by name. Because some sources may not have experience being featured in a story, they may not have a full understanding of the ramifications of sharing their story publicly and the possibility it will be available on the internet forever.
- Prioritize opportunities for sources' stories to be told in their own words in ways that emphasize authenticity and unfiltered insights.
- Uphold the dignity of constituents through empowering imagery and messages that engage the audience and inspire hope.
- Commit to accurate representation of the story being told. Avoid cropping photos, using footage, or framing text in ways that may lead to an inaccurate portrayal of individuals or their circumstances.
- If freelance writers are commissioned to produce the story, review ethical guidelines with them prior to making an assignment.
- Remember that you are in a position of power: As an organization that provides funding to your community, remember that you are in a place of power and influence. When you collect information for your programs, remember that it should never be something that is contingent on individuals and communities receiving services.

REVIEW PROCESS

- Establish a standard written protocol for a story review, that includes identifying instances that may require varying from protocol for extenuating circumstances.
- Strive to establish a team of reviewers who can provide feedback and insights different than your own.
- Create a standardized review message that clarifies to the reviewer that their review should focus on ensuring the facts are correct and quotes are accurately represented.
- Provide the source with a reasonable amount of time to review any content.
- Negotiate/make changes based on source feedback.
- When possible, provide the full context for how the story will be presented—including headlines, supporting imagery—and how it will appear across communications channels.

PUBLICATION

- Make sources aware of the story's publication date and how it will be shared across all of your communications channels.
- Check in with sources after publication to ensure accuracy and to see if they have concerns.
- Let the source know if the story will be shared via other channels or formats or has generated media interest.

ETHICAL & ANTI-RACIST STORYTELLING GUIDELINES

POST-PUBLICATION

- Share with the source the positive benefits that the story has generated.
- Establish a protocol for reuse of the story in other formats and for other purposes. Share relevant aspects of protocol with the source.
- Establish a timeline with an end date for use of the story unless explicit permission is granted by the source at time of republication.
- Respect the feelings of the subject post publication, which could include editing or pulling the story.

IMAGERY/PHOTOGRAPHS/ SOCIAL MEDIA

- Be specific about what you can and cannot control or moderate on social media.
- For social media channels that your organization controls, establish a protocol for determining when comments should be addressed.
- Avoid cropping or manipulating photos in ways that may lead to an inaccurate portrayal of individuals or their circumstances.
- Make sure policies related to reuse of stories also cover reuse of photos or images.

THE NEON COHORT

NEON is a cohort of community foundations from across the United States that works together to dismantle structural and systemic racism and achieve equity in social and economic mobility in their communities.

Central Indiana Community Foundation

Indianapolis, IN

Cleveland Foundation

Cleveland, OH

Connecticut Urban Opportunity Collaborative

Community Foundation for Greater New Haven, Fairfield County's Community Foundation, and Hartford Foundation for Public Giving work together as a statewide consortium.

Hawai'i Community Foundation

Oahu, HI

Lincoln Community Foundation

Lincoln, NE

Seattle Foundation

Seattle, WA

Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Mountain View, CA



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