

# Journalist's tool kit for working with vulnerable sources

It's vital for journalists to seek out and interview people from all walks of life. Reporters also need to recognize their ethical duty to protect sources who lack the knowledge they need to protect themselves.

This set of best practices is a curated list of tools that will help journalists incorporate the voices of vulnerable people, while minimizing harm at the same time.

## MAKING CONTACT

- Start with an informal conversation that is off the record. Describe the story, how long it might take to report and what type of questions you are likely to ask. Explain how background and off-the-record guidelines work, so they know their options if they want to keep information private, but feel it is important for the reporter to be aware of something.
- Show the source a similar story, so they have a concrete idea of what you do.
- Describe the nature of your news organization and tell the source that their friends, family and employers are likely to see the story. Explain all the places the story will appear, including if it will live forever on your newsroom's website.
- Answer all the questions the source may have, and be available to answer more questions that come up. When possible, give the source time — several days or even several weeks — to decide whether they want to take part in the story.

## THE SOURCE'S BEST INTERESTS

- Assess whether your source is able to advocate for themselves. While you can take extra care with a vulnerable source, as a journalist your primary loyalty is to your audience and to the story you are trying to tell. You cannot also be primarily responsible for looking out for your source's best interest.
- If your source does not seem able to advocate for themselves, encourage them to rely on another trusted person. When that's not possible, discuss with your editor whether your source is truly capable of consenting to participate in the story.

### IDENTIFICATION

- Work with your editor to offer private individuals a range of options for how they will be identified. Consider initials, middle names or other ways to afford the source a level of privacy.
- When a source is at risk of personal harm from retaliation or other punitive responses to the story, use your newsroom's standards to offer complete anonymity if possible. Explain to the audience why the source is anonymous.
- When offering complete anonymity, comb the story for any details that will undermine that promise and remove them from the story. However you mutually agree to identify the source, explain that some people close to the story may still be able to deduce the source's identity.

### ONGOING PARTICIPATION

- Meet in person when possible.
- Let the source know they can decline to answer questions. Be respectful if a source wants to keep information out of the story. Be open to discussing alternatives if a source wants to take information off the record before a story is published.
- When a source reveals information that could cause personal harm or embarrassment, give them a chance to rephrase or reframe the information if it's relevant to the story.
- Continue to explain the reporting process, including how you will fact-check the source's information and that you may interview other people.
- Explain that you will likely only use a small fraction of all the information you gather.
- Be extra patient when your subject matter involves trauma.

### BEFORE PUBLICATION

- Be sure the source knows when the story is planned to be published and where it will appear.
- Tell them how the story is likely to be featured on various social platforms.
- As a way of fact-checking, go over every detail about the source that will be included in the story and explain the context.
- Discuss with editors if comments will be enabled on the story and, if so, who will moderate them.

### AFTER PUBLICATION

- As soon as the story is publicly available, let them know how they can see or hear it.
- Offer a sincere thank you.
- Check back in 24 to 48 hours after publication or airing and see how they feel. Even when you've taken care, some sources may have regrets. You may not be able to make that better, but listening to those regrets may make you a better reporter.
- Be available and responsive if the source experiences any repercussions. A follow-up story may be warranted.
- Correct any errors quickly.