Institute for Nonprofit News

April 2021

Case Study

The diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) series

How nonprofit newsrooms track sources to ensure coverage reflects community

WABE, The Beacon and WFAE

How nonprofit newsrooms track sources to ensure coverage reflects community

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Introduction

Source tracking, or the practice of tracking the demographics of sources for stories, has emerged as one way newsrooms create awareness around whom they interview, quote and in some cases deem as experts in their coverage.

Across INN's 300+ nonprofit media organizations, our research team noticed several newsrooms using different kinds of source tracking to see where they stand in featuring a diverse mix of voices in their journalism. In this study, we highlight source tracking efforts within WABE News in Atlanta, The Beacon (a news startup in Kansas City), and WFAE in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Before we dig into these examples, let's acknowledge that source tracking is not a fix-all solution or a fail-proof indicator of a newsroom taking diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) seriously. Indeed, some of the more diverse organizations within INN's network (those with 40% or more employees of color) engage underserved communities without source tracking.

Memphis-based MLK50, which focuses on poverty, power and public policy, has always had diversity baked into everything it does. As editor and publisher Wendi Thomas said in INN's DEI report, "Equity is so core to our identity that I honestly never thought about stating it explicitly." In an informal survey of recent stories, Thomas found a majority of the people quoted are Black, reflecting the majority Black city and county the newsroom is based in. "Racial and gender parity isn't limited to sources, of course. With every staff, freelancer or contractor hire, I track whether we're matching the racial demographics of the community we cover."

This study examines how these newsrooms have approached source tracking and the logistics of carrying out surveys and data analysis. The newsrooms also provided reflections and advice for other newsrooms hoping to start or refine source tracking initiatives.

ABOUT INN

The Institute for Nonprofit News strengthens and supports more than 300 independent news organizations in a new kind of media network: nonprofit, nonpartisan and dedicated to public service. See: inn.org.

USE THIS RESOURCE

Last year, INN published a report on diversity, equity and inclusion across the nonprofit news field. The report is based on survey data from 117 member publications about staff diversity in 2019. Click here for the report.

Background Information

The Beacon launched in 2020 as a nonprofit news outlet that serves Kansas and Missouri. The Kansas City-based newsroom focuses on health care, education, economics, environment and civic engagement. Jennifer Hack Wolf, the audience development manager, and Kelsey Ryan, the founder and now publisher and editor, lead most of the newsroom's source tracking efforts. As a startup newsroom, the staff is still lean, with four full-time employees (including a few reporters, a marketing and engagement specialist, an editorial social media specialist and a copy editor) and several freelancers.

WABE News is the National Public Radio (NPR) station serving the Atlanta region — one of the largest media markets in the United States. The radio station prides itself on serving its community, which provides 84% of its funding. WABE broadcasts shows from NPR, Public Radio International and American Public Media, and produces local content and several original shows. WABE employs 45 full-time people working on content, including reporters, producers, hosts and editors. Senior editor Susanna Capelouto leads most of the organization's source tracking efforts, along with Chief Content Officer Scott Woelfel.

WFAE is the NPR station serving a 32-county listening area around Charlotte. In addition to running national programming, the station has a signature local talk show "Charlotte Talks" and has morning, afternoon and evening shows that are heavily localized with the latest news and information from the Charlotte region. WFAE employs 27 full-time people who work in radio programming and news, including five reporters and six reporting and engagement fellows. Chief Content Officer and Executive Vice President Ju-Don Marshall leads most of the newsroom's source tracking efforts.

Explaining their motivation

As a startup newsroom, **The Beacon** emphasized diversity from its very foundation — how to be representative of the community from all angles: in staffing, board representation and content. It had to be a "no excuses approach to diversity," Hack Wolf said.

But the organization's initiatives intensified as George Floyd's death under a Minneapolis police officer's knee renewed conversations on race in America amid Black Lives Matter protests last summer. "We needed to make sure that our community was getting the very best approach to journalism, from our limited resources, at a time when history was being made every weekend," Hack Wolf said. From internal conversations, The Beacon identified a need to audit

TIP

USE THIS RESOURCE

In the past few years, source tracking has emerged as a practice for many publishers. See how newsrooms such as Chalkbeat, WHYY, KCUR, Spotlight PA, Wisconsin Public Radio, and North Carolina Health News have developed their own systems for tracking and reporting on sources' race, gender and other demographics.

its coverage to ensure it reflects the diversity of the communities involved. Hack Wolf said the newsroom was invested in the work not only for "diversity for diversity's sake," but also to develop more nuanced stories relevant to its audience, and to attract a more diverse audience.

At **WABE News**, Capelouto says, journalists have always been informally aware of whether they are talking to diverse sources. An environmental reporter at the station was already tracking her sources on her own, while for others the diversity was more in the back of their minds. Capelouto, other leaders at WABE and journalists across the newsroom wanted to make tracking more systematic: *Who are we talking to? Who are we not talking to?* The goal is to grow their audience and do more engagement journalism, Capelouto said.

At **WFAE,** Marshall said her newsroom stepped up its efforts to diversify sources and topics about four years ago. "We wanted to make a deliberate attempt to just get more voices of people of color on our air and reflected in our stories," Marshall said. Yet, she recognized that the success of their early efforts were mainly anecdotal. So in the last year, WFAE started thinking about how to track source diversity more explicitly.

WFAE wants to make sure its work is more inclusive "and to make sure that we are increasingly bringing more people into the conversation," Marshall said, including different age groups and geographic communities.

Creating source tracking systems

The Beacon: In 2020, the staff took part in a DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging) training for local nonprofits, which included learning about the historical and institutional analysis of racism in their community and the United States. A Kansas City-based change management and consulting firm, Sophic Solutions, hosted it. Since everyone at The Beacon participated, Hack Wolf said it allowed them all to have a shared framework for understanding how to address systemic inequities. After the training, the team debriefed and set goals, including launching a source tracking system.

Hack Wolf began by using resources in the Gather engagement community and learned how Chalkbeat had approached its diversity audit. She then went back to her colleagues to discuss what would work for The Beacon.

In September 2020, The Beacon launched its source audit among full-time staff. (Hack Wolf said about 80% of The Beacon's stories are from staff writers.) The newsroom set up a Google Form that asked sources to report their race and ethnicity, gender, ZIP code and whether they were part of a community not mentioned that is underrepresented in the media. Some respondents, for

TIP

USE THIS RESOURCE

Use this resource: America Amplified's Matthew Long-Middleton put together this great resource for news outlets getting started with source tracking. See this resource for two different diversity tracking forms you can use, depending on the method that works best for your team: either having reporters ask sources questions and filling in the form, or sending the source a follow-up survey to complete.

TIP

USE THIS RESOURCE

Need some help designing your source tracking survey language? See the Appendix on the last page of this case.

An image of The Beacon's team meeting over Zoom during the summer of 2020

example, noted they were disabled or a veteran. See the Appendix below for The Beacon's full set of questions. After a story was completed, reporters sent this survey form to sources explaining the goal and making clear that it was optional. "It's really important that we let people self-identify their answers," Hack Wolf said.

This workflow yielded too few responses, and the share from nonwhite sources seemed lower than their actual representation. After a few months, The Beacon tried a new strategy. Reporters began asking sources these same questions at the conclusion of every interview. Reporters still made it clear that a source's response was optional and that race and ethnicity would be included in the story only if relevant.

Hack Wolf says the reporters soon felt awkward asking the questions and didn't want to take more of their sources' time. Many felt like they could better explain the newsroom's source tracking effort through email. The Beacon soon pivoted again and in 2021, the reporters are back to using the Google Form. As Hack Wolf notes, it's an ongoing conversation: "Everything is an experiment. Everything is a prototype. If it doesn't work, we're going to figure out another approach and then try again."

WABE News: Atlanta's NPR station started using a Google Form for source tracking in August 2020. WABE's system is modeled after the source tracking

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> JENNIFER HACK WOLF, THE BEACON AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

strategy of a fellow public media station, KCUR in Kansas City, that was largely developed by America Amplified's Matthew Long-Middleton.

In the form, WABE journalists answer a series of questions about their sources for radio and digital stories. Those questions include the producer or reporter's name, title of the work, the work's publication or air date, the source's name, the type of source (elected official, expert, member of the public, etc.), and the source's gender and race/ethnicity.

WABE lets its journalists use their discretion for the data input. If they are not sure of the race/ethnicity or gender self-identification of an individual, journalists are instructed to ask the source. So far, Capelouto says there haven't been any major issues with sources understanding what the newsroom is doing. All of the journalists have their own process for when they fill out the form.

LaShawn Hudson, a producer on one of WABE's public affairs talk shows, says she does her source tracking entries at the end of each week. "In an ideal world, after you finish work for the day, you go in and plug in the headline of your story and the sources. It takes a couple minutes to do, it's just remembering to do it."

For Hudson, source tracking was a seamless process because she did it at a previous job as a television news producer. "I understood the value in it. I knew the purpose behind it. And I think it's important."

WFAE: Charlotte's NPR station uses Google Sheets to track its sources throughout the organization. Marshall says the station considered using a database platform, Airtable, to provide more layered data about their efforts. But for now, spreadsheets seemed to be the easier way to get everyone involved.

Producers generally ask sources about their identity during pre-screening conversations, while reporters ask at the end of interviews. Editors, reporters and producers add to the spreadsheet at least once a week.

When explaining source tracking efforts to sources, Marshall said WFAE makes clear that participation is voluntary. "Ultimately, the control is in the hands of the source. So they can make that decision whether that's a question they want to answer or not, there's no pressure." If a source does not participate, WFAE journalists will note their own observation — but as a rule of thumb, Marshall says, journalists don't make assumptions about a person's identity. "If somebody refuses and we know this person is obviously a person of color, we can note that as a general observation. But we wouldn't make an assumption that a person is Black or white, or anything."

TIP

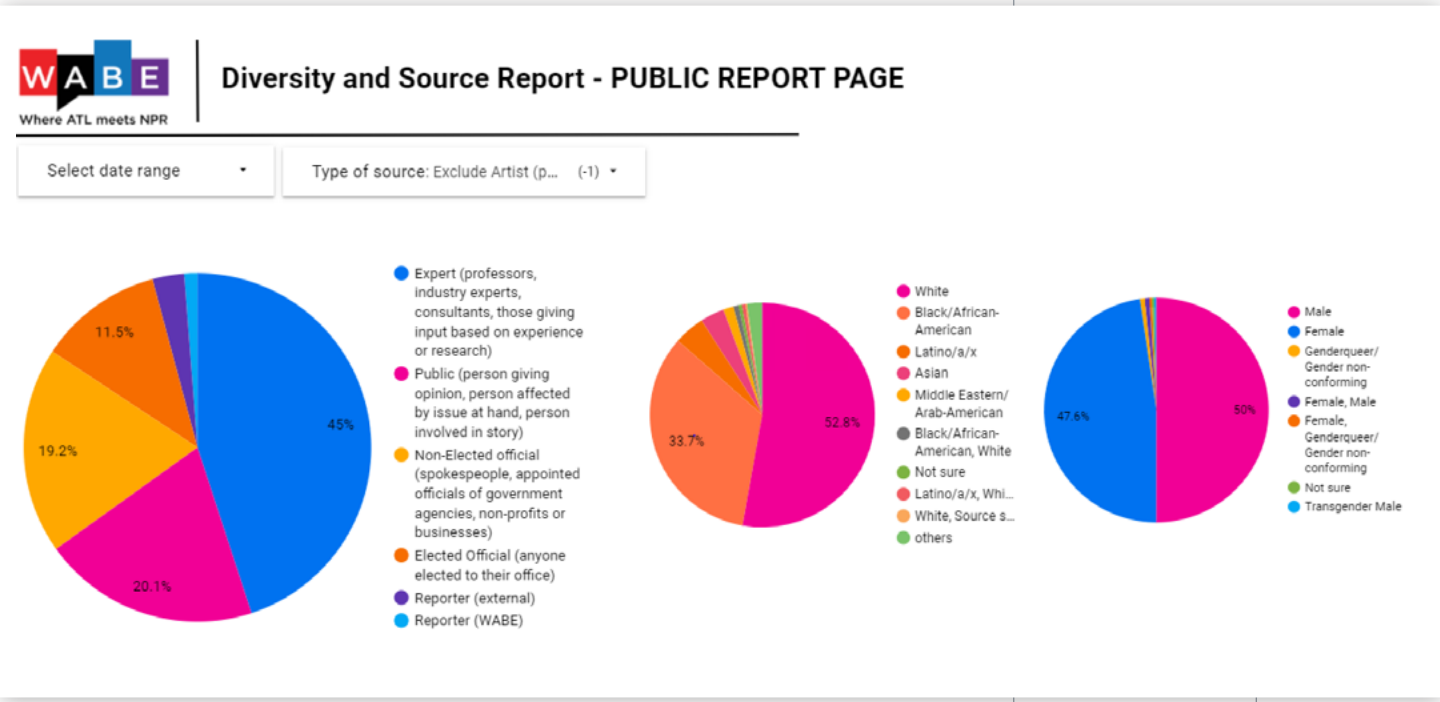
MAKE THE WORKFLOW CLEAR.

Appoint at least one person (ideally a person in a leadership position) as the primary manager of your newsroom's source tracking efforts. This person will be responsible for launching the initial source tracking system and ensuring that reporters are submitting the right data each week or month. Within larger organizations, America Amplified's Long-Middleton advocates for devoting someone at least part time to manage source tracking projects, if resources allow.

TIP

USE A SCRIPT.

If you're asking sources for answers over the phone or IRL, use a script. Marshall says some journalists have been uncomfortable asking sources questions about their race or gender. That's why the station created the following script to help clearly explain the motivations to sources: *"WFAE's newsroom strives to reach out to diverse sources. We want diversity in terms of race, gender, age, where people live, and viewpoints. So, in an effort to see how we're doing, we want to learn a little more about the people we talk to. All of these questions are voluntary and will only be used to help WFAE's newsroom."* Key word here: voluntary.



This screenshot from WABE's source tracking tool shows part of WABE's first quarter results, but may not include all of the data.

The results

The Beacon: The Kansas City newsroom is still early in its data collection efforts and not ready yet to make results public. From an initial analysis, Hack Wolf said the newsroom has found a higher than expected number of sources who have chosen gender-nonconforming identities. (The Beacon does not assign sources pronouns in stories when in doubt, and if unable to ask a source, the organization uses last names on subsequent references in stories.)

Hack Wolf said the findings from the first year will be a baseline to help redirect efforts to better reach goals. The source diversity audit already has led The Beacon to look at other areas in which the organization can increase representation from people of color, including the news outlet's virtual events and photography.

WABE News: Capelouto said she delivered the first WABE source tracking report for 2020 to management, and they are in the process of discussing it with staff. The organization is now working on making the results public. The results will help the Atlanta NPR station assess whether the current process is useful or if they need to make changes to the categories, Capelouto said. She plans to present a report each quarter to WABE's board.

In addition to leveraging their first report to examine their process, Capelouto says they want sourcing to reflect Metro Atlanta's population, which is 34% Black or African American.

WABE plans to decide later whether to add metrics like ZIP code, income and age to help better understand sources. Capelouto envisions providing the questionnaire to guests in-person who come into the station, after the pandemic.

Even without comprehensive results yet, WABE has found that having the presence of the tracker is making the newsroom more conscious about including people of color and other underrepresented populations in their stories. "I can see that our reporters are very, very much wanting to reflect the community that they broadcast to," Capelouto said.

WABE also found source tracking efforts lead to more intentionality around whom the newsroom deems as an "expert." For COVID-19 coverage, for example, the station is intentionally talking to epidemiologists from both Emory University (an institution that usually leads to sources being white doctors) and Morehouse School of Medicine (an institution that historically trains Black doctors).

WFAE: Last summer, before WFAE's full source tracking effort began, a producer at the station created an inventory of previous stories, pulling out source demographics from about 680 sources between June and August. The full tracking efforts only began among editors, reporters and producers in December 2020, so it's too early to determine full results. Marshall said the organization wants to at least capture a one-year snapshot of sources to begin a meaningful analysis.

WFAE hasn't publicly made statements about its source tracking efforts, but Marshall says the audience has noticed the efforts around increasing the diversity of voices. She points to one example where a community member upon meeting her for the first time said, "I want to just stop and personally thank you because I've noticed the changes. I really appreciate what you're doing, because for the first time, I see myself reflected" in programming. "That's a powerful statement and a powerful acknowledgement of what we're attempting to do," Marshall said. "And while tracking is important, it's more important that the work we're doing has an impact on our community."

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>
> JU-DON MARSHALL , WFAE CHIEF CONTENT OFFICER AND EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

TIP

THINK OF SOURCE TRACKING AS AN AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITY.

America Amplified's Long-Middleton recommends using source tracking efforts to engage with sources who may have had little or no contact with your news organization. When sending sources the survey and thanking them for sharing their perspectives, consider including a link to the story they were featured in or an email newsletter that might be of interest.

Advice for other news outlets

1 **Think about the people your journalism should cover and engage, and how source diversity can help you track this mission.** Take it from The Beacon's Hack Wolf: "If your mission involves emphasizing Black and Brown voices because you want to serve communities that have lacked representation, then you probably are hoping to see audit results that reflect that mission." If you're a local or statewide newsroom looking for a place to start, consider using census data to inform your understanding of who your newsroom's audience is and who should be represented in your newsroom's coverage.

2 **Make source tracking an ongoing conversation.** The Beacon team regularly checks in about source tracking work at staff meetings, as well as part of a monthly KPIs (key performance indicators) meeting. "It keeps that conversation front of mind for all of us. But it's also something that feels maintainable and exciting for us to maintain," Hack Wolf said. For WABE, the biggest challenge might be reminding colleagues to actually fill out the form, so Capelouto sends weekly staff reminders.

3 **Consider other ways your newsroom can better represent people of color in stories.** It's not just about who your sources are, but also how your journalists, editors and producers describe people of color and other underrepresented populations in stories. The Beacon created a document that serves as a living style guide on how to describe underrepresented people in media, defining uses for words like "vulnerable" and "minority" in its style guide. Taking inspiration from the Global Press Style Guide, these are some sample styles The Beacon follows:

Vulnerable

Rule: Avoid broad use of the word "vulnerable," as in "vulnerable populations." It must be paired with context that explains what the person or community is vulnerable to. Vulnerability should be treated as temporary, not something that some people have inherently at their core.

Rationale: Term is not specific. Letting the story source describe their situation in precise terms promotes reader understanding and source dignity.

Minority

Rule: Avoid the use of the word minority in reference to a group of people unless directly quoting.

Rationale: Precise descriptions promote reader clarity and source dignity. Term centers whiteness as the norm and "minority" communities as secondary. The term ignores shifting demographics.

4 **Just get started with a system that works best for your newsroom, and be ready to pivot.** WABE's Capelouto has clear advice for other newsrooms considering tracking its sources: "It's not that hard. Don't be talking about it. Just do it." Take it from The Beacon, which launched one workflow for source tracking and quickly pivoted when it wasn't working for the staff. The Beacon's Hack Wolf stresses that DEI plans will differ from newsroom to newsroom since every community is different. "No one else can design your newsroom DEI plan for you. That work has to come from the staff. Every newsroom is going to have different needs and different opportunities." WFAE's Marshall advises to just start with intention. "It doesn't have to be perfect. You'll improve it over time."

Appendix: Survey Language

TIP

RETHINK YOUR SURVEY DESIGN.

When designing survey questions that ask people to indicate race, ethnicity or gender, the language you use matters. For example, try to avoid using the word "Other" and instead allow for multi-selecting (for more on that, see here). Also, be sure to use inclusive demographic breakdowns.

THE BEACON: For the below survey language, the source is the respondent.

- **What is your race/ethnicity? If you prefer to self-describe, please use the "Other" option. (select all that apply)**
  - Black or African American
  - East Asian or Asian American
  - Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
  - Latino or Hispanic
  - Middle Eastern or Arab American
  - Native American or Alaska Native
  - South Asian or Indian American
  - White
  - I do not wish to answer
  - Other (with space to describe)
- **What is your gender? If you prefer to self-describe, please use the "Other" option.**
  - Female
  - Male
  - Prefer not to say
  - Other (with space to describe)
- **What is your home zip code?**
- **If you're a member of a community we haven't mentioned that is underrepresented in media as sources, please let us know which below. (with space to describe)**

WABE: For the below survey language, the reporter or producer is the respondent, and fills in information about the source.

- **Which producer/reporter are you?**
  - Title of work
  - First publish/air date
  - Source's name
- **What type of source was this person?**
  - Elected official (anyone elected to their office)
  - Non-elected official (spokespeople, appointed officials of government agencies, nonprofits or businesses)
  - Expert (professors, industry experts, consultants, those giving input based on experience or research)
  - Public (person giving opinion, person affected by issue at hand, person involved in story)
  - Artists (person making a living in the creative field such as musicians, writers, performers)
  - Reporter (WABE)
  - Reporter (external)
  - Other
- **Gender**
  - Female
  - Male
  - Transgender Female
  - Transgender Male
  - Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming
  - Source prefers not to share gender
  - Not sure
  - Other
- **Race/Ethnicity**
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Black/African American
  - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - Latino/a/x
  - Middle Eastern/Arab-American
  - White
  - Source prefers not to share their race
  - Not sure
  - Other

WFAE: For the below survey language, the producer or reporter is the respondent. Producers generally ask sources about their identity during pre-screening conversations, while reporters ask at the end of interviews.

- Name
- Title or description of who they are
- Race
- Gender
- Age
- Location
- Political party affiliation ("It's not a comfortable question for everybody," Marshall said. "But we want some way of knowing whether we are reaching people across ideological differences ... because this country, as we know, is so polarized by politics right now.")
- Story topic
- Where did the voices appear — what program (the station doesn't want one show, for example, to do all the heavy lifting for diversity)
- If the source has previously appeared or been used at the station (denoted with a check mark to help determine how many new people the organization is reaching)