

Use the Right Words: Guidelines Reporting on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Canada

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Farrah Khan:

So hello, everybody. I'm so excited to see you at the Use the Right Words: Guidelines for Reporting on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Canada. I'm really excited to have you in this space. This has been one of the tools that I'm most excited about seeing emerge in this time. My name is Farrah Khan. I am the CEO of Possibility Seeds and I'm so excited to be here with you today.

So obviously this is a longstanding conversation that we've had about sexual violence and gender-based violence. Beginning to talk about what happens in the media and how we can build better conversations is so important so we're going to be having kind of a very robust conversation today. Do you want to go to the next slide, Laura?

So the training today, it's really important that we name that the conversation today is taking place across traditional territories of many Indigenous nations. This land that I am on is the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples, and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples.

Toronto is covered by Treaty 13, an agreement signed by the Mississaugas of the New Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands to peacefully share and care for the resources. This agreement was broken by European settlers. The process of colonization in Canada over the past two centuries has enacted systematic genocide against the Indigenous peoples of this land.

We see these acts of colonization and genocide continuing today, in the forced sterilization of Indigenous women; the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People; the over-representation of Indigenous children in care; I would just say even the representation of Indigenous children in care, through the criminalization of Indigenous people resulting in overrepresentation of prisons or just in prison; and environmental racism and land theft of Indigenous territories.

As we come together to respond to the experiences of sexual and gender-based violence, we must acknowledge that this is a de-colonial struggle. They cannot be separated. Supporting

decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty is critical to the work to creating a culture of consent and accountability.

Today we make that action by thinking and saying and naming and inviting you all to read the Calls for Justice within Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. If you want to learn how your institution can answer these calls to action, you can download the worksheet by clicking on the link in the chat.

Just a little bit more about today. So today's training is a part of our ongoing National Skillshare Series, where we feature subject matter experts in conversation about urgent issues, emerging trends, and promising practices and strategies to address sexual and gender-based violence on campus and across so many different institutions like journalism.

In the conversation today we're going to have Aubrianna Snow, Robyn Doolittle, Alyshah Hasham, and Shannon Giannitsopoulou – my gosh – about the Use the Right Words: Guidelines for Reporting on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Canadian guide.

This guide is now freely available for download. So please know you can click and download it and we'd love to hear your feedback on it. And it is part of a suite of guides that'll be coming out in the next couple of months looking at different aspects of gender-based violence and sexual violence reporting in the media from economic abuse to child sexual abuse to coercive control. We're looking forward to all that feedback.

This project is a part of the larger Courage to Act project through Possibility Seeds. We are a leading social change consultancy dedicated to gender justice, equity, and inclusion. We believe safe, equitable workplaces, organizations and institutions, like the media, are possible and we have over 20 years of experience doing this work.

Courage to Act right now is our multi-year national initiative to address gender-based violence on campuses across Canada. It builds on key recommendations with the Possibility Seeds' vital report, Courage to Act: Developing a National Framework to Address Gender-Based Violence on Campus. We built this with over 170 advocates and experts across the country, leaders doing this work from students, survivors, campus researchers, everybody under that hat to work together with us.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge our funders. Our funders of course are Women and Gender Equality Canada, the Federal Government of Canada.

One thing I want to name is about self-care. Aubrianna and I have been talking about this even in terms of our own work on this guide. I know Shannon and I have talked about this a lot. It's very intense to do this work around gender-based violence. It's difficult, it brings up lots of different feelings, it's not something that is not close to home, so really making sure to take care of yourself in this conversation.

Many of us have our own experiences of survivorship and supporting people we love or care about who have been subjected to gender-based violence. Just a reminder to be attentive to your well-being and engage in these difficult conversations. You know, the nice thing about these things, you don't have to have your camera on, you can take a deep breath, grab a glass of water and just notice what's happening in your body during, afterwards have conversations with friends but make sure that you take care of yourselves.

And just a note on accessibility. Attendees can view the live captions on this session by clicking on the link in the chat box. You can also listen to this session in French by selecting the French language channel using "Interpretation." At the end of the session, you will find a link to an evaluation form. We're grateful if you take a few minutes to share how this workshop was for you, it's anonymous. And following the session, we will email you a copy of the evaluation and a link to the recording so you can view it again.

OK, I'm really excited now to introduce all the speakers. Let me start with Aubrianna Snow. She is the Stakeholder Relations Specialist for Courage to Act. She is a writer and a feminist of mixed Mi'kmaw and settler descent as a guest in Treaty Six Territory. And she's published in Chatelaine, the Edmonton Journal, and Muskrat Magazine and in September she is starting Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. Welcome, Aubrianna.

And of course Robyn Doolittle. She is a member of The Globe and Mail's investigative team and is a two-time winner of Canada's Michener Award – I hope I said that correct. Her "Unfounded" investigation explored the ways that Canadian police services handled sexual assault cases and prompted a national overhaul of policy, training and practices about sexual violence.

This series was awarded a National Newspaper Award for investigative journalism among other honours, including two

awards at the international Online Journalism Awards. Her latest book, “Had It Coming – What’s Fair In The Age of #MeToo?” was shortlisted for an RBC Taylor Prize for non-fiction. She was also named Journalist of the Year – just casually – in 2017.

Alyshah Hasham is a city hall reporter for the Toronto Star currently covering the mayoral election. Before that, she spent several years writing about courts and crime for the Star, winning the 2021 Landsberg award with her colleague Wendy Gillis for stories about men’s violence against women. I can say that Alyshah is one of my favourite reporters that really does an amazing job also on court reporting and I hope you can talk about that later.

And Shannon Giannitsopoulou – my gosh, Shannon, I’m so sorry. Shannon Giannitsopoulou is a co-author of the original Use the Right Words guide, and a fierce feminist I can say, as well as the updated guide. Shannon is a critical scholar and social justice practitioner. She is currently completing a Doctorate in Social Justice Education.

Currently, she’s a Manager of DEI at YWCA Canada – YMCA Canada, and specializes in research, communications, and project management within an anti-oppressive framework. She’s also the lead of anti-oppressive consulting. We’ll just put the link in there, you should learn more about her work. And Shannon was one of the co-founders of femifesto, which is so amazing.

And my name is Farrah. You all know me so we’re going to get started. I’m so excited to be here. So we’re going to turn off the slides and we’ll get in there. The first question I want to ask, and maybe I’ll will start with Aubrianna, what’s bringing you joy in the work to address sexual violence in journalism?

Aubrianna Snow:

Absolutely, Farrah. Thank you so much. I think what’s bringing joy about this work for me is being able to engage and share in this space of learning with folks who maybe haven’t known a lot about gender-based violence and its intersections or maybe haven’t lived that experience themselves and as well as those who have. Just building those opportunities to connect and share and learn with folks I think has been so, so powerful and it’s something that really gives me a lot of joy and really motivates me in my work. So thank you, it’s a pleasure to be here.

Farrah Khan:

Thank you. I’m going to pass it on to Alyshah.

Alyshah Hasham: I'm a naturally optimistic person, which sometimes surprises people given that I spend all my time in courtrooms listening to horrible things happen. But I think what gives me joy is there's genuinely been change. I think I've been – I maybe spent 10 years sort of within the justice system working on stories and I really do see the conversation shifting. I think that, you know, sometimes you get angry at what's going on but, yes, that gives me joy that we are able to move the conversation forward.

Farrah Khan: Shannon, what about for you?

Shannon Giannitsopoulou: For me, a lot of things. There was the day recently when Tory Lanez was denied a new trial and on the same day Trump was found liable for sexual abuse in the civil case against him. And I'm an abolitionist but that day was very chef's kiss and I hope that Megan Stallion and E. Jean Carroll are healing.

I think what brings me joy is seeing this project live on. It was started, as we said, we launched our first guide in 2015 and so to see it thriving and expanding gives me a lot of hope that feminists are so determined and will continue to push for consent culture.

Farrah Khan: That was a really good day, Shannon. I think it was also like Evan Rachel Wood also like did – like the defamation suit against –

Shannon Giannitsopoulou: Yes.

Farrah Khan: – yes, from Marilyn Mason also. It was like a triple whammy of goodness. Robyn, what is bringing you joy in this work?

Robyn Doolittle: Today. I'm so excited that you guys are finally launching this and putting this out into the world. The Use the Right Word guide was so important. Like I can say from being in newsrooms at the time, it really had an impact in newsrooms.

I mean I think like the big, big thing was this practice that people have been using, including, you know, myself as a reporter will write, "Alleged sexual assault" but not, "Alleged break and enter," and just reframing and asking ourselves like why is that. And interrogating those things and learning and growing and getting better and I know it's going to have a similar impact.

And it's I think important to have this out there, this resource out there because it's great that – everyone who's here right now I think is a true believer, right. Like there's an element of preaching to the choir here but I know that there are, you

know, journalists, media, other people out there who will sit down with the guide later on if they couldn't maybe attend today or for whatever reason didn't.

So it's just such important work and thank you to everyone for all of your work in putting this out there, it's so invaluable.

Farrah Khan:

That means a lot to hear. Thank you so much. Yes, I think Shannon and I met in 20 – we didn't meet but we started working on this in 2011 and at the time there was – it was during the Stephen Bell case. And really seeing how much the conversation has changed, as you've said, and how little it's changed, you know, in some ways like we've seen.

And then I think the thing with Johnny Depp even at Cannes this week and just seen the celebration of him and the way some media has taken that conversation, and some haven't really tells us, you know, there's things that we have to go forward and not.

Robyn, and you've done tremendous work yourself to kind of push the conversation forward. You know, we talked about it in your bio, talking about the work that you've done around Unfounded. What's some of the most important things you've learned about the Unfounded investigation and how did it influence – you specifically wrote a piece for the Use the Right Words guide about your learnings there. What was something important that you'd want to share with other journalists?

Robyn Doolittle:

I mean, yes, like I'm very proud of the Unfounded series and all that it showed etc., and the change that it generated and – but for me personally as a journalist, like it just was a very intense and important learning experience for me. You know, I start my piece in the guide, like my little submission with the biggest mistake I made during Unfounded which was the very first interview that I did.

And I was coming off of years, I had been a police reporter, I had been a city hall reporter, I had a lot of experience interviewing people and gathering information and, you know, getting the facts. I had never had to really confront kind of trauma-informed reporting. I had never really thought about it, I just kind of thought I was – you know, I'm a professional, I'm a nice person, I'm just going to do it this way. And I wrote about how I really messed up that interview and how it fell apart and I never was able to include it in the series.

And, you know, the Coles Notes version, you can read the full one in the guide, but I'd done a pre-interview with the individual as I like to do. And it was off the record and her support person was there and I felt that we'd built a rapport, we'd covered kind of the groundwork of how this was going to work. I always do pre-interviews, give them a chance to talk through any questions they have, explain how the process works.

And so when we actually went and sat to do the formal interview I kind of like took for granted that we'd already done this work and I – you know, I started, like got out my notepad and like, “OK, how did it – the day that this happened, what happened? What were you wearing” because I'm trying to write a scene.

Like, “What did you have for breakfast that day? What did you say to your mother when you walked out the door?” And I could tell she just completely clammed up and was very uncomfortable. And I didn't exactly understand why but I knew that I needed to stop, and I said, “You know what, let's take a break. Like obviously this isn't the right moment.”

So obviously I'd done exactly what the Unfounded series showed police were doing wrong which is like dragging someone through a story chronologically and making them relive their trauma in a way that wasn't serving my readers or the source. So there's lots of things, I mean there's a million things that I learned in Unfounded that I wrote about. You know, just the importance of bringing the complainant along with you as a reporting – as part of the process.

And it doesn't mean that you have them vet your story, it doesn't mean you don't include details, it doesn't mean you don't vigorously investigate their claims. It doesn't mean – as I explain to everyone, like my job is not to believe someone right away, right. My job is to hear a story and to investigate it and to write the facts.

And everyone gets that when you're upfront and you explain that the best thing I can do for you in telling your story is to vigorously investigate it and everyone's like, “Of course. What do you need? Like do you want my medical files, do you want my police report? Can I give” – like, “I need contacts of everyone you were with that night,” you go through the process, you do a fact check before it runs.

They don't give me their story and I own it. If they're really uncomfortable, if they, you know, a couple of weeks before like, “I am freaking out. I don't think I can go through with this,” no problem you're out of the story, like that's not a big

deal. And just keeping that line of communication open are all the things I learned. I went on way too long on that but, yes, it was a huge learning curve for me and I hope I can help others avoid some of my mistakes.

Farrah Khan:

I think it was so important that you put in not just like the successes but the challenges in those moments and I really appreciated the candour in the piece that you wrote. And also, you know, having witnessed you work with survivors and connected survivors with you and have been interviewed by you as well, the way that you do the checking afterwards to be like, “OK, this is what’s said” really helps people feel ownership over their stories. So I really appreciate that, naming that piece.

And Alyshah, you also have done a number of reporting. I just think about even the live tweeting that you’ve done of the courtrooms. I think I oftentimes will come into your DMs and say, “How are you doing” because it’s sometimes so intense some of the things that you are sharing.

Can you talk about the Jacob Hoggard trial because I think, you know, it was one of – since Ghomeshi that was one of the more high-profile court cases that we saw. You were live tweeting; you were also writing a lot about it. What do you think that taught you about reporting on sexual violence in general and just what was that experience like?

Alyshah Hasham:

Yes. I just wanted to echo what Robyn had said about the reporting process. And I think that I have learned so much from her and the way that she has done reporting and reading about all of that, and so also from so many other people like Farrah about how to do this. So I am very thankful because I think without all of that I would be a very different reporter now than I hopefully am.

So yes, it was very interesting to do the Hoggard trial. I saw it as kind of a bookend between Ghomeshi and – because at the Ghomeshi trial, I was starting out. I didn’t know a lot of the stuff that I know now, and I didn’t know how much I didn’t know. But we covered that case very, very intensely and it was the same with the Hoggard trial.

I just want to say we don’t have cameras in courtrooms, it’s very different from the U.S. So there’s this huge responsibility like as a report to make sure you’re conveying what is happening in the courtroom accurately and thinking about the words you’re using because those are the things that people are going to take and then make judgements about the case.

Like there's a lot of weight that goes into how you're describing somebody's – subjective things like how they appear and their emotion. Whether you think that they're sad, whether they're scared, whether they're stumbling over their words, what does that mean because people can't see that for themselves. And, you know, there's this phrase that they use in court sometimes like the ring of truth, which is like an impossibly subjective thing and you're trying to convey all of that to people in a fair way.

And so when you're – and you have to do it quickly because you're either live tweeting which is I didn't want to live tweet the Hoggard trial initially. I said, "Please, it's really hard to do these things because you have to make these decisions on the fly" and I always worry about getting them wrong. But I started doing it and I think it's also really valuable because there's so much that doesn't make it into a story.

So I'll just like very quickly. So with court reporting, you have to make snap decisions often about what to include. And so when you're thinking about trauma-informed reporting, you know, you hear extremely graphic intimate details about a person's life. Because it's different from doing an interview where you can control the context and you can create the most sort of relaxing environment and take breaks, and you can do all of these things. You're not doing that in the court process and it often like can be very adversarial and very difficult.

So I have to decide how much detail to include. What do I think strikes the balance between conveying how serious and awful something is while, at the same time, trying to remember that there is a person who is going through the worst moments of their life and what about their dignity and what about their family and all of those things.

And like, you know, I'm in the courtroom every day. I'm going to see these people again; I'm going to see their families again and like I think that's a really important part of remembering that there are human beings involved in this. And it's really easy – I think Zoom is very disconnecting. And when you know that you're going to be confronted with someone and they're going to say – and this has happened to me where I'll write a story and I'll think I've done a good job and people will be really upset because these are upsetting times and they'll tell me how they feel and I will listen.

And anyway, I'm going on too long. I'll tell you two quick things about the Hoggard trial which I think are useful. One is that there were two instances, one was about the

publication ban. You can ask for more detail to get a publication ban.

So in one instance, there was a young woman who really didn't want her hometown to be named. It is not something that would've occurred to me that would've been identifying to her, it's not that small a town but she knew that the people – her family would immediately connect the two things together. So that was part of the court order, it was great. Super helpful. I wouldn't have known if they hadn't of told us.

The other thing is that there was a very emotional phone call that was played during the case and as a reporter, I thought immediately we got to publish this phone call because it says so much. It says so much about Hoggard, it says so much about the state of mind that the woman was in. And then we had a discussion about it in court and the judge said, "It was so traumatic for her to re-hear this phone call I cannot imagine allowing the media to publish it," and I thought, "Oh my God, I didn't even think" – I wasn't like thinking of that immediately.

And then I think to everyone's credit nobody ever went and published that phone call, we didn't fight to do that. And sometimes it's not about what's legally right, it's also about what are you actually trying to achieve here, and do you think that this is the way you're going to do it. And I think you can have those discussions and we're a lot more open to having those discussions.

I think Robyn would tell you the same thing that like 10 years ago there would've been maybe a much stronger push to do some of this stuff and right now there's – and that's a credit to everyone who has done work along the way to have a greater understanding of the re-traumatizing impact of this work. I will stop there.

Farrah Khan:

I got so excited when you said like the legal right versus like just like ethical or just like the right thing to do. And I think that when we teach around sexual violence, the conversation around like, you know, oftentimes young people will come to me and say, "OK, well legally can I do XYZ or legally this?"

And it's the same with the conversation here, it's like even if something is legal or allowable is it like morally right. Is it like ethically something that you can stand behind, is it something – trauma-informed journalism that you can do. So yes, these are really important reflections.

Shannon, I'm going to come to you now. You know, as someone who's been longstanding in this project, why has it been from the jump, and now especially even as we go forward, to have an intersectional approach to reporting on sexual violence?

Shannon Giannitsopoulou: Yes, that's a big question so I'll try not to talk too long about it. But I think it's so important not only with sexual violence but all forms of domestic violence and gender-based violence that the reporting be intersectional. I think we have to understand the power and impact of mainstream media which really can shape public opinion and attitudes in several ways.

The media sets the agenda for public discourse, so it determines what issues are considered important and worthy of discussion by deciding which stories to include or omit. And also the way that media frames a story shapes how audiences interpret and understand events. And that framing can happen in a lot of ways that might be intentional or not and might be less obvious or not.

But I think in our guide we work to demystify that by pointing out the language and frameworks that can actually serve to shame and blame survivors less subtly or really blatantly. So understanding those functions of the mainstream media, intersectional media reporting can resist bias and harmful narratives.

So for example whorephobic stigma against sex workers results in the idea that they're deserving of violence against them because of their work. So media stories that we found in our scan might just include that someone is a sex worker. Might not even use the preferred term sex worker, might say prostitute and the kind of violence they were subjected to without contextualizing it within the larger systems of oppression. And just kind of dropping that in as a fact almost to suggest that it was because they were a sex worker that they were sexually assaulted.

Intersectional reporting can also and must include the stories of survivors who exist at the margins of multiple forms of oppression. And that allows for a more accurate understanding of the impact of sexual violence on individuals who are often underrepresented or totally excluded from mainstream narratives.

So for example when we did a media scan we saw frequent images of young, thin, white women drinking accompanying articles about sexual violence. Suggesting that that is who's deserving of protection and safety and concern and thought, while also blaming them for drinking, but excluding all of the

other folks that also experience sexual violence at disproportionate rates.

And also in her study, Kristen Gilchrist found that the stories of Indigenous women who are murdered or missing had their stories placed further from the front page of media papers and with smaller photos or no photos in comparison to white women, thus pushing Indigenous women who experience violence to the further corners of our minds.

Intersectional media reporting can also expose how certain groups may be disproportionately affected by sexual violence due to intersecting and interlocking systems of oppression. So for example rural or Indigenous women may have less access to support services and that may impact their ability to heal or seek support. Sex workers are more vulnerable to sexual violence due to laws which criminalize sex work and create unsafe working conditions for them.

And lastly, intersectional media reporting can counter the tendency to portray survivors in narrow and one-dimensional ways, avoid victim blaming and simplifying the complexity of their experiences.

So for example in stories where a survivor might not have reported for a “long time” knowing that most survivors don’t report, there might be an analysis where you can discuss that Black and Indigenous women may not feel safe reporting violence to the police because of the profound amount of discrimination and violence these communities experience from police and a prison system such as racial profiling and disproportionate incarceration due to anti-Black racism and anti-Indigenous racism.

So in short as Audre Lorde says, “There is no single-issue struggle because we don’t lead single-issue lives.” And so if we’re going to capture the realities of sexual violence and not leave stories out and not deepen stigma and harmful stereotyping, intersectional media reporting is really important.

Farrah Khan:

Thank you so much. And I really appreciated the examples that you provided. I was also thinking in the guide, you know, I think we found – Aubri and I, I think it was six. Six different headlines that, you know, dehumanized Tina Fontaine which is, you know, a 15-year-old Indigenous girl that was killed and sexually assaulted.

And so many of them, you know, referred to her only as the dead girl. Didn’t even use her name in the headlines, didn’t even give her the grace of humanity even in her death. And

kept talking about the drugs in her system and not the fact that the person who killed her fed her drugs like and, you know, all the things around making it as if she was at fault instead of that. So we saw a lot of that specifically in Indigenous women and girls in our research.

I want to bring that and loop that into Aubrianna because I know a lot of your writing and work has been around even true crimes and the sensationalism of it. And just like how journalism needs to be trauma-informed and why that's important so it's not just about intersectionality, it's about trauma-informed journalism. Why was that important to put that in Use the Right Words guides because you helped write the new version, which is so exciting?

Aubrianna Snow:

Yes, absolutely. Thank you so much, Farrah. I think, Shannon, you really hit on a lot of important points in that discussion of intersectionality. But I think it's important when we're talking about intersectionality versus a trauma-informed lens that we don't kind of settle for the bare minimum when it comes to social media and pop discussions of what intersectionality looks like.

I think a lot of times it gets settled on this discussion of who's receiving representation. And while I think that representation is really crucial and it's so easy to see the positive impact of good and substantive representation for marginalized folks, I think it's also just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to telling those stories of folks with marginalized identities and their lived experiences in a way that's not only factual but also responsible.

So a trauma-informed lens in journalism I think doesn't really just stop at whose voices are included in the story. It's a lens that strives to I think capture the complexity of communities and the social systems and the barriers that affect them, some of what you were hitting on there, Shannon, but as well as their strength.

I mean at the end of the day, all of the people involved in new stories are people and it's important to capture that complexity and I think that's a lot of what a trauma-informed lens strives to do.

Like I've been taught that journalism at its core is about information and promoting access to information in the aim of achieving a public good. And I think to ensure that people are getting the right information that they need to truly make sense of the story and those nuances and those intersections and those complexities that are not everybody's lived experience to truly portray those in a way that folks can

understand. And to ensure that we're contributing to that public good instead of causing further harm, which I think is also something that we've seen a lot of.

In the mainstream media industry and also in true crime especially, as you mentioned, Farrah, I think that trauma-informed lens is really essential and it's so encompassing of everything. You know, I fight the urge to start connecting it to a million different things, but it really is. It's just making space for people as they are and sharing the details and the complications of situations that are in the media. Yes, I've barely hit the tip of the iceberg, but I think I'll stop it there.

Farrah Khan:

Thank you so much. And trauma-informed journalism can look like making sure that if you're doing a Twitter thread – like I think, Alyshah, actually we put a tweet of yours in the guide. Just like when you're doing, you know, the courtroom play-by-play you put something in about like, "Here's some supports you can contact," or like, "I'm going to do a Twitter thread on this." It can also be like putting it in your article.

But it's also what both you and Shannon have named really about the pieces. So like it's not just talking about communities and places of deficit, but talking about the strengths of the community and kind of going into that healing-centred conversation of like not just about like the horror that happened but also how people heal. What does it look like to heal, what resources are out there.

For both Robyn and Alyshah, I'd love to ask you a question that's off the list that I gave you. So I apologize in advance if this is a little bit – but I'm really interested to know, you know, there has been a lot of pushback sometimes when there's questions around being trauma-informed in journalism or working a different way.

So, you know, there's always a push where we have to use alleged. I think I saw an article just recently where it was alleged was used five times in like two paragraphs. You know, we have to use alleged, we have to be unbiased.

So that pushback against like we can't be too trauma-informed because then we're unbiased as journalists. The idea that we can't – you know, you have to tell the story how it is, we can't change it. What are ways that you would give suggestions to journalists, young journalists that are coming up or, you know, moving into the industry as the industry is changing so much about how they can kind of pushback if there is questions for them, if they want to have

this approach and this framework to it? So maybe I'll start with Robyn, then we'll go to Alyshah.

Robyn Doolittle:

You and I have had a lot of really good discussions about this, and I've learned a lot from you too and kind of raised my kind of perspective of the reality. Like I work at The Globe and Mail, like I work at the man. Like we are the man, we are the most, you know, mainstream of mainstream, I mean as Alyshah does at the Toronto Star. Like this is it so there's a bunch of things to consider.

I think trying to depoliticize the idea of what it means to be trauma-informed, like I think that that's how I talk about it. I wouldn't normally talk about being trauma-informed, I would talk about things like when I do interviews with complainants, I call them complainants. It's a neutral word. It's not victim, it's not survivor, and I can talk about that in a little bit too about why that's important.

When I do interviews with complainants I want to get the best information out of them, and the best way to get information out of them is for them to feel safe and in control. Like because tricking someone or freaking someone out to the point where they say something is not accurate, right. Like and that's I think – like Alyshah was talking a little bit about, you know, 10 years ago the type of conversations that are happening in newsrooms weren't happening.

And like I can say when I started as a journalist, you know, 15 years ago, I think we were very much taught that you were trying to like extract information from someone and then you own it and then you decide if you want to print it or not print it. And I see it – I'm hesitant to say collaborative, but it is collaborative and like I'm just in constant conversation with, you know, complainants or sources.

And I think that that's the kind of thing that I talk about with editors and some of the old school ones are a little – might get their backs up a little about like, "Well we don't have sources vet stories," and it's like of course you don't, but we do fact checking, right.

Like a person in a story who's being portrayed in a negative light gets a big, long email from me before a story runs, like my due diligence email. This is where I lay out exactly what's going in the story, exactly the allegations against them, what do they have to say to this, to this, to this, like there are no surprises. And yet for so long the people who are trusting us to tell their story, the sources, the vulnerable

people get no heads up about what's going in the paper, like that's just silly.

So I talk a lot about things like that which – and I mean it's very tied to consent I think. And you can imagine someone who has been violated why that would be so traumatizing to have no consent over how your own story is told.

And I think I mentioned this a little bit in my earlier preamble, but something that I really do a lot is I have a pre-interview. I go through the process with people like, "I'm an investigative journalist. This is going to take a long time. This might be eight months or a year." Like *Unfounded* was a year and a half, 20 months or something like that before a story ran.

"This is how this process goes and my job is to be skeptical. Like that is my job. Whether I'm investigating a sexual assault, whether I'm investigating the police, whether I'm investigating a corrupt politician or a crooked business like I'm supposed to be skeptical and that's where I'm coming from. And again, to do the best job I can in telling your story, I need to vigorously investigate it."

Like the horror story is the *Rolling Stone* 'A Rape on Campus' piece where the magazine published a story that was, you know, instantly debunked by the *Washington Post* and other reporters. And the *Columbia Review of Journalism* did this big analysis of what went wrong in that story, and they spoke with the woman and – who maintains that something happened, but she isn't quite sure what.

But the point was she said to them she was nervous and didn't want to proceed but she felt she couldn't back out. And the reporters who worked on the story said that they didn't want to push too hard on some of the questions because they didn't want to re-traumatize her.

Like you did not help her. She was completely humiliated and her world kind of torn apart by being drawn into this massive trial. And so these are all the kind of things that I talk about without using some of the language that I think might pull people into a broader culture war fight, which is not helpful for anyone. So be trauma-informed by like not saying the word but doing the stuff.

Farrah Khan:

Yes, I think that's something that we talked about even with this guide. I think we had – Emily Mathieu was our wonderful editor on this guide. There were lots of conversations sometimes about just like we want to have the language in there that speaks to what's happening, but then

also getting newsrooms to move forward without them being like, you know, “We can’t talk” –

Robyn Doolittle:

There’s a bunch of crazy lefties trying to language police and the woke mob, and it’s like actually it’s just better journalism. It’s like this is just basic better journalism. So that’s I think the right way to talk about it. And I will say like again I work for The Globe, it’s the man, like there’s a lot of support in this newsroom for that and I think Alyshah would say that’s the same with the Star of what I know there.

Like I’m not saying it’s everywhere and there’s always learnings to be had. But I think when you can actually sit down and step back and talk about why you’re doing it, what is this, how this gets better journalism, everyone’s like, “Oh, no-brainer. Obviously, of course.”

Farrah Khan:

Alyshah, what about for you?

Alyshah Hasham:

I would agree with everything Robyn said. I think that you’re looking at it as like how do you make your craft better and what are you bringing – like I’ll talk about the objectivity thing a little bit because I think that’s a really important thing because, you know, increasingly we understand that objectivity is a myth, right.

Like nobody is inherently object – or the idea that the person who is seen as objective is like not me, right, like that it’s somebody else’s view of what is objective. And if you think about like what especially younger reporters are bringing to the table and racialized and people with different lived experiences are bringing to the table, it’s not that you’re not objective or whatever that’s supposed to be.

We all have biases, like it’s understanding them and challenging them and thinking about them and being open to learning and bringing your ability to connect and understand the context and nuances of what is going on with somebody.

So if I’m interviewing somebody who I can understand better because that’s like the experiences that I’ve had and that I bring, that’s a valuable thing. That’s a valuable thing to telling the story, that’s a valuable thing to my newsroom because I am able to tell those stories in a better and more impactful and honest way.

Like it’s a detriment to always be looking at things from like one perspective and if you’re trying to add the – someone, I can’t remember if it was Shannon or Aubrianna, talked about like getting into like the complexity of people’s stories, right. Like I think that like journalism – people want a narrative,

right. A beginning, middle and end, like a good person, a bad – like it’s just so much easier when you have this like framework to tell a story and everything is so much more complicated than that.

Like Farrah and I have talked a lot about, I’ve written stories about recanting of accounts and why people do that and like the complex reasons that people have for wanting to engage in the justice system or not. And these are difficult and complex things that happen for reasons that are rational and irrational but like are happening. And you can’t have those conversations if you are just trying to like – you’re very concerned about being objective or seeing things from like a point of view that isn’t real.

And just like I would encourage people coming into this to embrace that and that not to – you know. One of the things that I worried about a lot early on, especially with court reporting, and like too willing to hear people out and like – and that’s on both sides.

I do a lot of reporting on people who are incarcerated and who are accused of things, and I’m very interested in rehabilitation and like how people can – like it’s not – you can be a person who thinks about things in a holistic way and that is not a bad thing. You don’t have to be – like you can cry, you can feel things, you can wonder if you’re doing the right thing. You don’t have to be like crusty and tough or whatever, like that’s all bullshit that has been made up, right. Like I don’t know.

So you don’t have to do things the way they’ve always been done, I would just echo Robyn in that. I think there is a lot more willingness to understand that and that is because of all the work that has been done through guides like this over time to push people’s understanding forward and people being willing to listen and change.

Farrah Khan:

I love when you’re talking about the bias piece because I think about there was I believe a Washington Post journalist who was told that she couldn’t write about a certain story because of her own – being subjected to sexual harassment herself and being told that she was biased. And it was so interesting because I’m like do they ever ask men who are reporting, “Have you committed sexual assault” before they report on sexual violence.

But, you know, and like also can be survivors but it’s just so interesting that like who is considered bias and who isn’t, you know, and who can write – even racism, we can talk about everything, right.

This is really helpful. And I think it's really important to have those conversations about like how do we reach the people we need to reach because Robyn as you named, like there are people that are like die hard, "I want to change the media and write about this," and then we're also seeing a proliferation of user-run media sources.

So, you know, during the Amber Heard, Johnny Depp trial we saw lots of people on TikTok who were not journalists but became journalists in the way of how they reported on the trial daily. Or we saw people take – the media industry has changed so much that so many more people are freelancers now and so are, you know, creating articles that are not working for one media centre or another, and so outlet. And so it's really making sure that this conversation is just beyond even 'the man' as you said, which is The Globe and Mail and Toronto Star, but beyond that to other outlets and also to individual reporters and journalists.

Aubrianna and Shannon, I'm going to bring you in for a second and just think about – you know, because both of you as writers of the guide, thinking about like what was something that you really thought was important to include in the guide or you struggled with writing in the guide? Because I know both of you kind of when I've had – both of you had conversations about different pieces about it. Aubrianna, I'll start with you and then we'll go to Shannon.

Aubrianna Snow:

Yes. Thanks so much, Farrah. I think one thing that I was really happy to see in the guide, I think Robyn did an amazing job in her article outlining the interview process and some of the common pitfalls that I think we as journalists are sometimes prone to falling into in that realm.

I think it's also really profound the way that the guide explores all aspects of writing and reporting and being in media from that initial interview process to the writing and the frameworks and the imagery. Because this really is such a diverse and a large institution that we're all working within and there are so many folks who touch a story before it sees the light of day and it's not always the journalist or the interviewee who is getting to make those decisions about what happens in the story.

So I think that kind of broad perspective that was incorporated throughout the guide is really, really helpful in truly capturing the kinds of actions that are needed to generate the systemic change that I think we're looking for within the media industry and that I think is so, so needed. So it was really just an amazing pleasure to work on those sections in particular.

Farrah Khan:

Thanks, Aubrianna. I really appreciated – Aubrianna did a lot of those painstaking behind the scenes doing fact-checking for us on this. And I learned a lot about just reporting and fact-checking and being like OK, we saw this in one article, was it in other articles, this kind of theme. And some really hard conversations to be had around that, just around how people reported on specific or Indigenous women and Black girls.

Shannon, what about for you. What was something that you saw within it that you were like, “Yes, I’m so glad that’s here,” or something that you were writing and struggling with even from the first guide to this guide?

Shannon Giannitsopoulou: I think the section on why not all survivors report is so important to have in the guide, I’m so glad it’s in there. And it was in the original guide, it was updated. And I think it’s something that is a rape culture myth that is still misunderstood and recurring that if a survivor takes a really long – like a time to report, doesn’t report immediately then it casts doubt on their story.

But if you understand the realities of sexual violence and the impacts of trauma, it can take someone a really long time to even come to terms with themselves that what happened to them was sexual violence.

And to go back to the conversation about intersectionality, I really see that come out in considering who feels safe reporting, who is listened to when they report. What kind of systems are in place that make barriers to them accessing and receiving justice.

And so I think that is something that I continue to learn about because it’s so – there are so many barriers to reporting and I think it’s something that everyone, not just journalists but everyone can better understand. And just to deepen their empathy and understanding that there shouldn’t be an expectation on a survivor to heal and seek justice in one particular way in order for it to be a valid story that is deserving of empathy.

Farrah Khan:

Yes, that actually I think is so important. And I really appreciate you naming who gets to deserve to even be seen as a survivor and who doesn’t. I remember I was on CBC. The National has those round tables sometimes and I was on with – I don’t even know if we would call him a journalist but somebody who is a pundit, a right-wing pundit. And he kept saying to me, “Well you can’t call that person a survivor because they didn’t go through the criminal legal system.

You can't even call your survivor because you didn't go through the criminal legal system."

And it's like who gets access to the criminal legal system as we know it. You know, such a small percentage of survivors, you know, go through the criminal legal system, have access to it let alone conviction rates. And too often than not it's not racialized women, it's not Black women, it's not Indigenous women, it's not queer folks, it's not sex workers that stories are heard.

And so can you still see yourself as a survivor, yes. And making sure that those stories are clear and heard and it's important to expand what justice looks like is something that we named in the guide. I really appreciate you putting that out there, Shannon.

I'm going to go to one – actually I'm going to make sure. We have a great audience here. Do you have any questions that you want to pose, this is your moment to. We have eight more minutes, so if there's something that's burning in you just please know there's a Q&A that you can put in or you can put questions in the chat. Please let us know. I'm going to ask one more question of the panellists before we get to one question from the crowd.

So I want to put out to everyone, if you were talking to either a survivor or a journalist what's one thing that you would want them to know before settling into a story? Be it a story – like we've talked a lot about print journalism, but in this guide we talk about podcasts, we talk about TV interviews, and we talked – we use the example of the TSN interview with Kyle Beach. You know, different ways in which journalists can do. So I'm going to start with Robyn. What's the one thing that you would tell a survivor or a journalist about reporting on this?

Robyn Doolittle:

I'll do this in one minute because I know we're short on time. I think the conversation I always have with people is how are you going to feel when this comes out. And to think through that, you know, this is not like telling a story in the 1970s or 1980s where it's going to fade away if – like Google is forever.

I especially have this conversation with really young complainants. You know, they might be really gung-ho, "Put my name in the paper. I want my photo," yada-yada, "I'm 18," how are you going to feel when you're applying for a job, maybe you have kids one day that someone's going to read this. And it's not that there's anything to be ashamed of, of course there's not.

Like you shouldn't have to feel ashamed, you shouldn't have to worry about it, but we also live in reality. There's concerns about, you know, anyone who's in this space. I can say a lot of the women who participated in Unfounded found it very empowering, but those who were identifiable did get some harassment.

They also got reached out to by a lot of other survivors which, you know, is great but can also be very draining I think when it's like just constant and they're trying to live their lives too. So to really think that piece through.

And again, not every story, even if it's newsworthy, needs to be told. Like that, you know what, maybe someone's just not in a place and it's just the nightmare is to have someone call you months later and say, "I wish I hadn't of done that," or the next morning crying. And I have had that happen despite all the best work and it's not a good feeling. So avoid that on the front, have the tough conversations. Do the tough work before anything is published no matter the medium.

Alyshah Hasham:

I'll just add that, going off of what Robyn said before, but you have power in this process. It's about informed consent, I think Robyn used the word consent, and it's about like ask all the questions you want. Get all the information you want, like take your time to think about it. You have agency and power in this process.

And there is a power dynamic and, you know, you can work with a journalist, like talk about these things if you have questions, if you have concerns, are there details you think are too personal. It's if you're working with a journalist who cares about these things, they will have those conversations with you, and I think that's really important to know.

And it's also important to know who you're talking to. So I would also say like do a little Google, what kind of stories have they done, who are you talking to, what kind of outlet is it, what is the medium that you're going to be talking to somebody in. All of those things are important to do but it's just like you have actually more control over the process than I think some people think you do.

Farrah Khan:

Aubrianna, what about for you?

Aubrianna Snow:

There's so much I would say. But I think the two biggest takeaways, I think Alyshah you hit on something really important there which is that informed consent piece. I think the biggest thing I would say, particularly from a journalist lens, is that not everyone knows what you know and assuming so will get you in trouble sometimes.

So not everyone knows the interview process, not everyone knows the difference between on-the-record and off-the-record. And a lot of those questions you can help a lot to make your source comfortable and also ensure the story is coming together in a good way just by explaining those things from an accessibility standpoint.

And then the other thing I think would say is community care. As a survivor, if you're talking to media I think prioritizing self-care is absolutely key. And it's exactly like you said, Alyshah. Like I think folks maybe don't realize that you actually do have a lot of control over the story when you're speaking to journalists and most journalists will respect your wishes. I think anybody who's worth their salt will.

But also as a journalist, ensuring that community care piece not just with the person that you're speaking to but also the folks that you're working with on the story. Everybody has their own lived experiences and occupies different intersections of identity.

So just checking in with the folks you're working with and creating that safe space for an open discussion and learning together because I think that that openness to learning and that open-mindedness and to challenging your own beliefs and to even looking at the way you do things and being like, "OK, we need a new system." Like I think that openness is really what's key to doing this work in a good trauma-informed way and that's what gives me a little bit of hope in this work as well.

Farrah Khan: Shannon, do you want to do the last word?

Shannon Giannitsopoulou: Yes. I think just touching on some of the conversations we've had, just emphasizing that there is no such thing as objectivity. So when we've done some of the media trainings I think there's a question that, you know, "If I write in a way that is not shaming or blaming survivors then doesn't that mean I'm being biased?" But every single thing that's written or not written, the language that's used, the frameworks that are used, which details are included or not, all of that has a particular bias built into it.

We're human, we all have bias. And so since it can't be avoided we have – I think there's a responsibility to use language and frameworks and imagery that doesn't further harm survivors and that helps to have the general public have a better understanding of the way that sexual violence operates.

Farrah Khan:

And that's why we call it Use the Right Words because I think that's the way the conversation comes up, right, it's like how do we use them. And knowing that right changes so much. Like right two years ago, even when you were looking at the language and we said that this was the right language to use or this is the right approach, it changes as journalism changes, as this conversation changes.

I want to really thank our panellists today. This was my dream panel for this launch, for this conversation. You know, all of you have contributed so much to the work on addressing sexual violence in the media and also in larger ways in terms of policy, legislation. So I just want to say a big thank you.

I also want to thank other authors of the 2023 Use the Right Words guide, including Amal, Aubrianna, Anoodth, Caroline, Isabella, Natasha and Darshana. You know, thank you so much. I want to thank Kitty for the graphic design, using design elements of Michelle Campos Castillo. I want to thank Emily Mathieu for all of the amazing edits and just the patience for the past couple of years to do this.

We also have an advisory committee that is helping us look at all the other guides and pieces, so thank you to them. And I want to thank the Courage to Act Possibility Seeds project team for all of this behind-the-scenes work. There's so many in the team that have just gone above and beyond to make sure this happened, especially Laura Murray and Emily Allan and Maya. You know, making sure that this happened was so important.

And lastly, I want to thank all of you for being here. You know, these conversations are so near and dear. Media shapes the way in which we understand our lives, our stories, our communities and so it's so important that we talk back to the media and have these conversations.

And do it in a way that – you know, I think when Use the Right Words first started I think we did a lot of like, “You don't do this and you do this,” and a lot of it was adversarial with media and not seeing media as partners. And what's happened over the past decade was really a way to be like, right, we have to work as partners.

There are journalists that want to change, there are media outlets who want to change and want to take feedback so how do we work with them to make this happen. Because survivors do want to tell their stories, they just want to tell them in ways that are actually helpful for the cause and their communities and most importantly for their own healing.

So thanks everybody for joining us. You can get the guides off the link, and we look forward to more conversations. Look out for more guides coming out at the end of this month, continuing for the rest. This month Eternity Martis has one guide coming out about working with Black survivors and talking about Black journalists. We also have guides on coercive control, and financial and economic abuse. Thanks, everyone. Have a great day.

[End of recorded material 00:58:25]