

# REPORTING IN AN

# ERA OF DISINFORMATION:

Fairness Media Guide for Covering Women  
and People of Color Without Bias

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# INTRODUCTION

On January 6, 2021, democracy was attacked. The attack was fueled by racism, sexism, and years of disinformation, hate, and online conspiracy theories, a significant portion of which were peddled by our former president, Donald Trump. In the attack on the U.S. Capitol, members of the media and government leaders were threatened and assaulted.

The 117th United States Congress was the most diverse in history, with more women, people of color, and openly LGBTQ members than ever before. Similarly, President Joe Biden's proposed cabinet, if approved, will make history as the most diverse group to ever lead federal agencies. At the start of this new administration and meeting of Congress, the media can and must play a role in ensuring that this historic moment receives fair media coverage that doesn't add fuel to the fires of disinformation and hate.

Media representation plays a critical role in how people of color and women are perceived by the public. Headlines, photos, social media previews, and content of articles can be used directly, or taken out of context, to spread racist and sexist ideas, encourage or legitimize disinformation, and fuel conspiracy theories that sow distrust, undermine our democracy, disintegrate our sense of shared reality, and spark violence.

Disinformation and bias can inspire both online and offline attacks intended to delegitimize, depersonalize, and ultimately dissuade women and people of color from participating in politics. Women of color, LGBTQ people, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, and people who belong to religious minorities are at an even greater risk of becoming targets of disinformation campaigns, hate speech, and real-world violence.

The media must play a role in ensuring that women and people of color running for, nominated for, or holding positions of power in government are represented fairly. This guide will help journalists and social media platforms identify and avoid sexist and racist bias or disinformation when interviewing, writing about, or moderating content about women and people of color.

“The media plays a very significant role in shaping public perceptions about women and men, therefore it is important that reporting avoids any form of gender stereotypes, which often limit and trivialize women and men, as well as presenting an inaccurate view of the world and its possibilities.

Furthermore, the use of stereotypes reflects a mental block not only in terms of what society may expect from women and men, but also—more seriously—in terms of what women and men may expect from themselves.”

UNESCO, 2012

gettyimage  
Busa Photograph

# TIPS TO **AVOID ENCOURAGING** AND LEGITIMIZING DISINFORMATION AND BIAS

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**MEDIA COVERAGE  
PERPETUATES BIAS**

**MEDIA COVERAGE OF  
DISINFORMATION HELPS  
IT SPREAD**

**DISINFORMATION RELIES  
ON BIAS TO UNDERMINE**

# AVOIDING BIAS AND DISINFORMATION WHEN REPORTING ON POLITICAL NOMINEES

- Consider biases related to race, gender, ability, orientation, and other protected classes. Question and debunk stories, lines of questioning, and language that perpetuate bias.
- Ask yourself how a nominee's evaluation is filtered through biases against Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, Pacific Islander, disabled, LGBTQ people, women, and other underrepresented groups.
- Indigenous women often face a Catch-22 of either being erased as a relic of pre-colonial United States or being stereotyped, objectified, and hypersexualized. Be mindful avoiding these tropes and debunk them whenever possible.
- When choosing a nominee photo, ensure that it looks professional and doesn't play into any negative stereotypes.
- Ambition of women nominees should not be treated in a different light from that of men.
- Use gender-neutral language to help stop gender bias.
  - Use businessperson, chairperson, first-year (rather than freshman), congressperson.
  - Avoid using Mrs. unless it's preferred by the nominee, use Ms. because it doesn't designate marital status. Single women have historically been seen as undesirable or unworthy.
  - Use the proper title, such as Honorable, Senator, Secretary
- Focus on a nominee's policy without typecasting. Avoid focusing gender and civil rights questions solely on women and candidates of color.
  - Ask yourself: Would you say or write this about nominee who is a white man?

# AVOIDING BIAS AND DISINFORMATION WHEN REPORTING ON POLITICAL NOMINEES

- Don't use coded racist terms when discussing nominees
  - Using such terms reinforces the white supremacist idea of inferiority.
  - Using terms like articulate, well-educated, and hardworking to describe a person of color implies that such a thing is surprising, as in, "You're articulate for a Black person." It implies that people of color are expected to be inferior, and that this person is an exception. Most political leaders, candidates, and public servants are well-educated, well-spoken, and hardworking.
  - Don't question someone's "origins," "heritage," or "loyalty."
- Reporting on disinformation rather than debunking it can help spread it. You must call out disinformation as unfounded, a conspiracy theory, debunked, dubious, unlikely, misleading, a lie, false, etc. in the headline if you must write about disinformation.
- Avoid covering "trending" topics on Twitter as reflective of broad public support. Twitter "trends" are based on many factors and do not necessarily mean that a large number of users are participating in the conversation.
- As content is shared on social media, the headline, photo, and preview text that users see can unintentionally encourage and spread disinformation and biases that harm women, people of color, and other marginalized groups, so you should write headlines and social media posts as if they are the only things people will read. Headlines that sensationalize disinformation and racist or sexist attacks help to spread disinformation when they are circulated on social media and in news feeds.



# TIPS TO AVOID MIS-REPORTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS

- Consider biases that are at play when it comes to race, gender, ability, orientation, and other protected classes—question and debunk stories and language that perpetuate bias.
- Reporting on disinformation rather than **debunking it** can help spread it. Name disinformation as unfounded, a conspiracy theory, debunked, dubious, unlikely, misleading, a lie, false, etc. in the headline if you must write about disinformation.
- Do not share links to sources of disinformation, which can drive traffic to those spaces. It is better to share screenshots with no link.
- Avoid covering “trending” topics on Twitter as reflective of broad support, even when total volume is still very low. Twitter “trends” are based on many factors, and do not necessarily mean a large number of users are participating in a conversation.
- Avoid referring to Twitter trends or data as reflective of “social media”—only 22 percent of Americans are on Twitter.

**Ask yourself how this strand of disinformation is targeting Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, disabled, LGBTQ people, women, and other marginalized groups.**

# TIPS TO AVOID MIS-REPORTING ON SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS

- Don't write articles about "movements" or "viral" content online that are only moving among a few users on Facebook or Twitter.
- Avoid overemphasizing the role of foreign actors, which can undermine the reality that a lot of disinformation is spread by domestic actors.
- Avoid overemphasizing the role of bots, rather than the reality that many things that gain traction do so as a result of both artificial and organic sentiment.
- Bad actors have sought out and do seek out opponents offline. Do not report personal information that bad actors could use to identify people who may be targets.
- Be on the lookout for signs that a photo or video has been manipulated: to impersonate, change context, or play into racist, sexist, and anti-Semitic tropes.



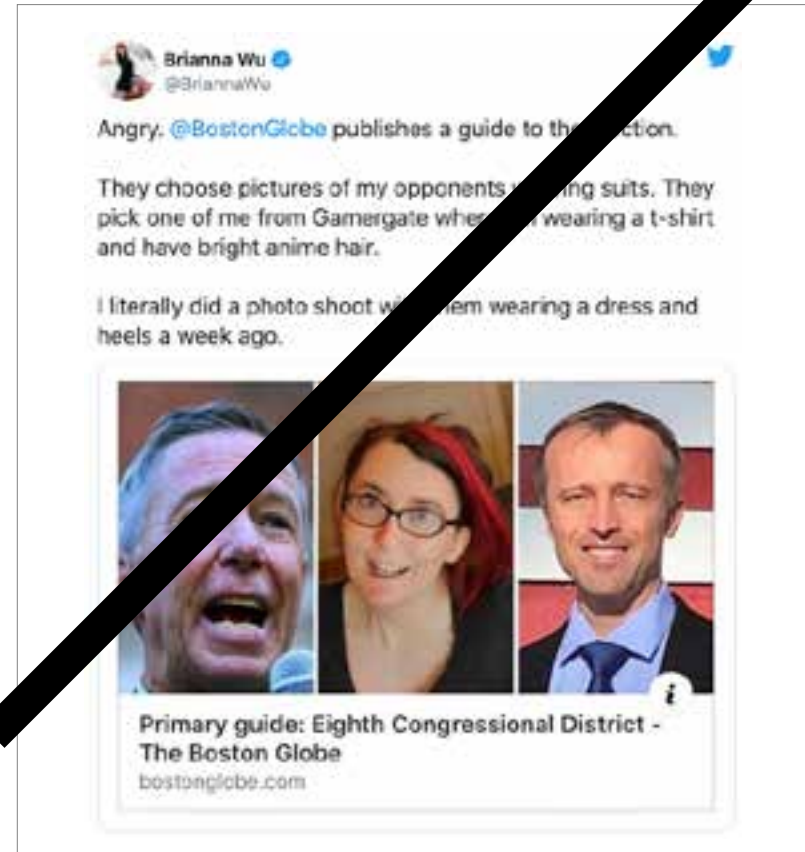
[Resource for covering and combatting disinformation](#)



This article states that the story had "begun to emerge on social media." In reality, the story came from a far-right news source and had received only limited attention on Twitter.

# BIAS AND DISINFORMATION IN HEADLINES, PHOTOS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

- As content is shared on social media, the headline, photo, and preview text that users see can encourage and unintentionally spread disinformation and biases that harm women, people of color, and other marginalized groups.
- Write headlines and social media posts as if it is the only thing people will read. Headlines that sensationalize disinformation and racist or sexist attacks help to spread it when it circulates on social media and news feeds.
- When choosing a photo ensure that it looks professional and doesn't play into any negative stereotypes based on race, gender, or other protected class.
- If you must cover disinformation make it clear in the headline and social media preview that the information is false.



The Boston Globe published a photo of male candidates in suits next to a woman candidate, Brianna Wu, in a t-shirt.



[Resource for headlines and social media](#)

# BIAS AND DISINFO IN HEADLINES, PHOTOS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA



After Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis testified about her relationship with a prosecutor working on her office's case against Trump, Fox News personality Jeanine Pirro claimed Willis was "without a doubt the most confrontational, combative nonresponsive, defiant, condescending, arrogant witness I have ever seen in a courtroom, especially in a courtroom, and not be taken away in the county bus and held in contempt at the local jail."

[Fox News, Jesse Watters Primetime, 2/15/24, 8:14pm]

## Democrat Strategist says Cori Bush's 'Hypocrisy' Is 'Pretty Outrageous'

CNN commentator Paul Begala stated that Rep. Cori Bush's (D-MO) support for defunding the police while hiring private security is "beyond irony all the way to hypocrisy" and that "it's terribly problematic."

[CNN, The Lead with Jake Tapper, 1/30/24, 5:03pm]

## 'Squad' goes ballistic over CNN commentator's claim Ilhan Omar is 'agent for Hamas'

by JACKSON WALKER | The National Desk | The New York Times | 1/31/24 at 10:37 AM

Jennings' comment echoed right-wing rhetoric surrounding Omar, despite his role on one of the largest mainstream cable news networks.

[Media Matters, 1/31/24; 10/13/23]

# CHECKING FOR BIAS

Prevent actively spreading or perpetuating harmful stereotypes

# CHECKING FOR BIAS

Disinformation campaigns often target marginalized people—women, people of color, LGBTQ people, immigrants, native people, Muslims, disabled people, etc.—to undermine their success and sow hate. Accordingly, it's critical to examine the impacts of systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of implicit bias in conjunction with disinformation.

Disinformation campaigns draw on negative stereotypes about marginalized people to lend a sense of credibility while attacking the intended target. The Pizzagate conspiracy that spread across social media relied on the narrative that Hillary Clinton was unlikeable and untrustworthy—insults that are frequently lobbed at women running for office. The birther conspiracy theory used to discredit President Obama relied on both racist and Islamophobic ideas. Conversely, disinformation can be fueled by a sensationalized headline, a debate question with sexist undertones, or a photo that plays into stereotypes.

**It's critical that journalists understand the ways that implicit bias can show up in politics, to both avoid perpetuating personal biases and debunk and question disinformation meant to harm diverse candidates and political leaders.**

**SEXIST TROPES AND  
STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD  
BE QUESTIONED AND  
DEBUNKED**

# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Associating a woman with men as a means of legitimizing

Historically, women required permission from their husband or father before most actions. Today, women are still often identified by their relationship to or comparison with men as a means of lending them legitimacy, but this implies that the woman cannot stand on her own experiences and accomplishments.

- Wife of, mother of, female version of, etc.
- Don't qualify gender when it's not necessary ex. A woman doctor, a woman attorney, a woman senator.
- Asking questions like "What does your husband think of you running?"





# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Too much emphasis on family roles

Men are more frequently depicted in mainstream media as professionals while women are more often shown in the context of their private lives. The media tends to cover men as thought and opinion leaders over women, preferring to focus on women's roles as wives and mothers. Such coverage takes women politicians to task if they are perceived as shirking their home responsibilities.

- Asking who is taking care of the kids or how they balance work and family
- “Now she’s a mother of two. And a US Senator. In between, she’s been ‘every size between a six and a sixteen.’ ” (See article on right.)



“On Fox News’ The Five, host Greg Gutfeld called Omar a “perfect example of exploiting the values of a great country in order to subvert those values. She came here to open arms and paid us back by castigating demonizing this country. And if you doubt me, ask her brother and/or husband.”

[Fox News, The Five, 12/15/24, 5:35pm]”

# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Treating women as if ambition is a negative trait

Any political, business, media, or government leader has ambition but this is only seen as negative for women: Men running for office have ambition while women running for office are ambitious. It creates a double standard that punishes women while celebrating men for doing the same.

- When Romney chose Paul Ryan as his running mate, the press called Ryan “a young, ambitious beltway insider, with a camera-ready presence” while Kamala Harris was recently labeled “too ambitious” to be vice president.

**Ambition for women should not be treated in a different light.**

# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Too much emphasis on appearance or voice

One of the most consistent findings to emerge from studies is that women candidates receive far more attention to appearance compared to men, which diminishes their perceived qualifications among voters.

- Analyzing or focusing on clothing
- Focusing on weight loss or gain
- Focusing on makeup and hair
- Telling a candidate to smile or talking about whether she smiles
- Hypersexualizing a candidate or politician
- Commenting on attractiveness
- Focusing on tone of voice rather than substance

# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Analyzing or focusing on clothing



# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Focusing on weight loss or gain

- Describing a woman's body/size

### How Senator Kirsten Gillibrand Lost Pounds

Remember, while running for election and helping pass landmark legislation, this [Senator] lost 100 pounds. She took time to relax and get healthy. Here are photos her journey with MS2.

By [Name]



## Focusing on makeup and hair

- Describing or focusing on makeup or lack thereof
- Following and criticizing changes in hairstyle

### Hillary Clinton Wears Hair Clip To The UN: 'Do Or Don't?' (PHOTOS ROLL)

Hillary Clinton worked on Monday at the United Nations, using a jaw clip to keep her hair off of her face. Secretary of State is no stranger to hair accessories, breaking out on occasions. [Check here and there](#), but what do you think of her latest one? Take a look and let us know.



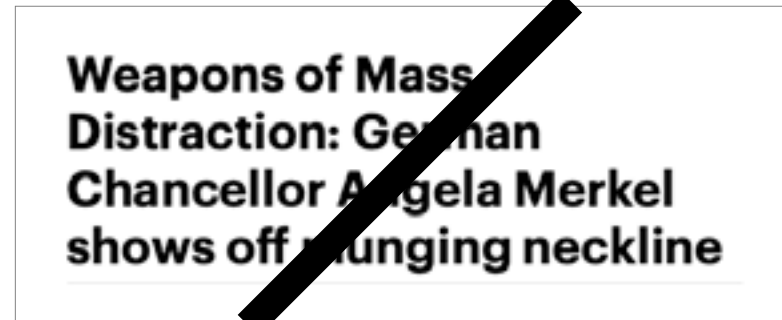
SEE GALLERY

# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Telling a woman to smile or talking about whether she smiles

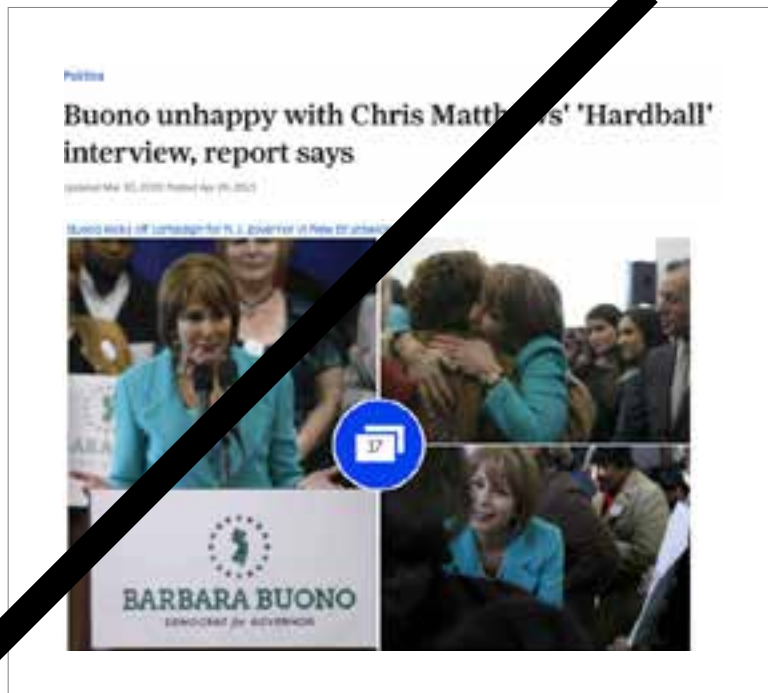


Hypersexualizing a woman or politician



# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Commenting on attractiveness



Chris Matthews asks NJ candidate if he can call her attractive

## Focusing on tone of voice rather than substance

- Shrill, bitter, angry, etc.



# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

**Avoid using terms that equate emotion with weakness or being “crazy” and stoicism with being cold**

Women are often penalized as being too emotional and seen as cold if they fail to show emotion, creating a double bind that doesn't apply to men.

- Mean girl
- Ice queen
- Bossy
- Feisty
- Unlikeable
- Abrasive
- Aggressive
- Irrational
- Emotional



# SEXIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Be cautious of using “unlikeable” or “unelectable”

Research has shown that voters are more likely to vote for a man candidate they don't like than a woman they don't like so discussions of likeability only help to harm women.



# USE GENDER NEUTRAL LANGUAGE TO HELP STOP GENDER BIAS

- Businessperson, chairperson, first-year (rather than freshman), congressperson
- Avoid using Mrs. unless it's preferred by the candidate; use Ms. because it doesn't designate marital status. Single women have historically been seen as undesirable or unworthy.
- Use the proper title such as Honorable, Senator, Secretary
- Use the they/them pronoun as a gender neutral pronoun.
  - Ex. An independent voter in Florida said they would...

**Question and debunk infantilizing and patronizing language such as calling adult women girls and calling Black men boys.**

# BE MINDFUL OF INTERSECTIONALITY

- These issues are compounded for people who hold more than one marginalized identity such as women of color, disabled women, and LGBTQ women. People may hold multiple racial or ethnic identities as well, such as Afro-Latinx.
- Avoid framing people as masculine or feminine, especially when writing about members of the LGBTQ community.
- Using the word “minority” implies inferiority or fringe. Use more accurate, descriptive terms like LGBTQ, Black, Indigenous, people of color, underrepresented, etc.
- In general, treat people as the multi-dimensional people that they are and avoid essentializing them due to their race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.
- Focus on people without typecasting: Avoid focusing gender and civil rights questions solely on women and people of color.
- Ask: would you say or write this about a white man?

**RACIST TROPES AND  
STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD  
BE QUESTIONED AND  
DEBUNKED**

# RACIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Questioning someone's "origins," "heritage," and "loyalty."

- Questioning commitment to the United States based on racism/nativism
- Implying a connection between an Arab American and/or Muslim candidate and terrorism
- Assuming Latinx people are immigrants or using the term "illegal immigrant" or "illegal alien."

 [Responding to Anti-Muslim Tropes: A Guide for Allies, by Muslim Advocates](#)



# RACIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, who lost her legs serving in Iraq, hits back after Tucker Carlson suggests she hates America



The Daily Caller (Tucker Carlson)  
September 22, 4:48 PM · Sep 22, 7:20 AM



# RACIST TROPES AND STEREOTYPES THAT SHOULD BE QUESTIONED AND DEBUNKED

## Equating emotions with anger and threats, cause for fear

- “Angry Black woman” trope
- Calling Black men dangerous
- Using “uppity” to describe Black people
- Associating the Coronavirus with Asian people
- Associating Latinx people with drugs and crime



# CODED RACIST TERMS TO QUESTION AND DEBUNK

- Using “urban” as code for Black.
- Describing a mixed-race person as “half,” as in half Black
- Colorist stereotyping rooted in the idea that someone with lighter skin is “better”
- Reinforcing the white supremacist idea of inferiority: Using terms like articulate, well-educated, and hardworking to describe a person of color implies a level of surprise, as in “you’re articulate for a Black person.” It implies that people of color are expected to be inferior and that this person is an exception. Most political candidates are leaders and public servants who are obviously well-educated, well-spoken, and hardworking.
- Avoid using “non-white”; it normalizes whiteness as a standard





# RACIST STEREOTYPES ABOUT INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES TO QUESTION AND DEBUNK

- Indigenous women often face a Catch-22 of either being erased as a relic of pre-colonial United States or being stereotyped, objectified, and hypersexualized. Be mindful of avoiding these tropes and debunk them whenever possible.
- Remember that Indigenous nations have sovereignty. Refer to Native people by their specific band or tribe.
- Call out uses of racial slurs and stereotypes like “squaw,” “Pocahontas,” “savage,” or “chief.” This includes refusing to normalize racial slurs through sports team names.
- Call out and avoid idioms and phrases that rely on cultural appropriation, like “put a feather in your cap,” references to “your tribe” to refer to a group of non-Indigenous people united by some commonality, or cleansing with sage or having a “spirit animal.”
- Avoid negative stereotypes such as framing Native people as poor, alcoholics, extinct, uneducated, violent, etc.



[Resource – reporting guides compiled by the Native American Journalists Association](#)

# **ABLEIST TERMS AND STEREOTYPES TO QUESTION AND DEBUNK**

# ABLEIST TERMS AND STEREOTYPES TO QUESTION AND DEBUNK

## Disability

- Disability is a spectrum that encompasses a range of experiences and includes visible and non-visible disabilities, such as chronic illness, mental illness, intellectual disabilities, neurodiversity, speech and learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and more.
- Avoid casting people with disabilities as inspirational or placing too much emphasis on “overcoming” a disability.
- Use the term preferred by the person: person in a wheelchair versus wheelchair user, deaf versus hard of hearing, disabled versus a person with a disability. When in doubt, center the person by using person-first language: person with a disability, person with diabetes.
- Avoid terms that equate terrorism and crime with mental illness, such as calling someone “crazy,” “a maniac,” or “psycho.”
- Avoid covering a story about a person with a disability in a way that treats the person as a villain, a hero, an idiot, or another stereotype.



**[Resources for reporting from the National Center on Disability and Journalism](#)**

# RESOURCES

- [GLAAD Media Reference Guide](#)
- [National Center on Disability and Journalism Resource Guide](#)
- [Native American Journalist Association Reporting Guide](#)
- [NiemanLab guide to investigating disinformation](#)
- [Media Matters resource on headlines and tweets](#)
- [First Draft - Essential Guide to Responsible Reporting in an Age of Information Disorder](#)
- [The NLGJA Stylebook](#)
- [NABJ Styleguide](#)
- [The National Association of Hispanic Journalists \(NAHJ\)](#)
- [Asian American Journalist Association](#)
- [The Debunking Handbook](#)
- [The Women's Media Center Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians](#)

# ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORTERS

- AI for the People
- A—B
- Americans for Contraception
- DemCast USA
- Disinfo Defense League
- Drive Agency
- Ekō
- Emerge
- EMILYs List Women Vote
- GLAAD
- Higher Heights for America
- Indivisible
- Kairos Action
- MomsRising
- National Women's Law Center Action Fund
- ProgressNow New Mexico
- Red Wine & Blue
- Reproductive Freedom for All
- She Persisted
- The Ballot Initiative Strategy Center
- Vote Run Lead
- Vote Run Lead Action
- #VOTEPROCHOICE
- Women's March
- Worthy Strategy Group