Going Rogue

Using (and breaking) style rules
to create a culture of
conscious editing

Overview

1. Introduction
2. Why does this matter?
3. Objectivity & Values
4. Case Studies
5. Wrap-Up

Who we are

Mic

Ali Killian, deputy copy chief

@ali_killian

Kaitlyn Jakola, copy chief

@KaitlynJakola

BuzzFeed Creative

Dan Toy, copy chief

@dw_toy

Sarah Schweppe, copy editor

@schweptaway

Neutral vs. representative language

- Neutral language strives for objectivity and does not make exceptions to established style rules
- Examples: repeating a person's last name instead of using a nontraditional pronoun; capitalizing Internet though that's no longer the colloquial style

- Representative language puts the humanity of the subjects first and strives to be as inclusive as possible
- Examples: using nontraditional pronouns; actively employing person-first language

Why does this matter?

Copy editors can lead the charge on representative journalism

- We are the details people
- Ensuring correct language use is the heart of copy editing
  - This should extend past proper grammar
- We are an outside perspective
- Our influence can be widespread

Respecting sources and readers

- There’s power in having a platform, and that power comes with responsibilities
  - To readers: to be accurate, trustworthy, transparent
  - To sources: to be thoughtful, minimize harm, treat them as humans first and foremost
- The world is not one-size-fits-all, so our style shouldn’t be either
- But breaks from established style should be deliberate

What about branded content?

- We follow the same ethics and style when representing brands as we do in our other content
- Because we're writing on behalf of a brand, we have a duty to uphold the highest standards, as it won't reflect poorly only on us but also on them if we don't
- We strive to be as diverse as possible in stock photos, illustrations, custom photography, or stories (e.g., including people with a range of body types and ethnicities in retail posts or same-sex and interracial couples in "couples" posts)

Objectivity & Values

Objectivity vs. detachment

- This session operates under the idea that media outlets should strive for detachment over objectivity
- Why?
  - True objectivity is impossible to achieve
  - But it is possible to detach yourself from the story
    - Reporting, writing and editing at an arm's length
    - Including all credible sides of a story, regardless of whether it aligns with the editors' or writers' beliefs

Values in editorial & branded content

- Mic and BuzzFeed adhere to specific sets of values
- Editorial: Being transparent with the reader is key
  - Mic is explicit about the values for the site and each channel. We published our editorial guidelines on the website.
- Branded: Clients come to BuzzFeed because they want the site's values and audience — they specifically don't want the "standard"
- Diverging from conventional practices means we will run into issues with conventional style

How do we reconcile subjective values with established style rules without losing the benefits of traditional style?

Case Studies

Singular “they” and nontraditional pronouns

- AP added the singular “they” to the stylebook in 2017, but says to only use it in limited cases
- Issues:
  - Nontraditional pronouns are essential to someone’s identity
  - People use them, regardless of whether media outlets print them
  - Amplifying voices of marginalized people is essential to Mic’s + BuzzFeed’s missions — including people outside the gender binary

How do we stick to our values while maintaining the clarity and consistency that AP Style establishes?

Singular “they” and nontraditional pronouns

- Mic: Follow the GLAAD Media Reference Guide and explain nontraditional pronouns when necessary
- Discussions produced the same conclusion: Exposure breeds understanding
- Established copy desk as a place to have thoughtful conversations
- BuzzFeed: Use the singular “they”
  - Also making a case for “themself”
- Respecting someone’s identity and disseminating information in the process

LGBTQ

- AP: LGBT and LGBTQ
- Other orgs vary

- Mic: Stick with LGBTQ as the umbrella term, while encouraging writers to be as specific as possible
  - But self-definitions are always OK

- BuzzFeed: Go with LGBT
  - Self-definitions are always OK
- Be mindful of the market
  - Example: “Ladyboy” is more acceptable in Thailand than the U.S.

alt-right

- AP blog: Don’t use it, unless in a direct quote “because it is meant as a euphemism to disguise racist aims”
- AP Stylebook: Include a definition because it “may exist primarily as a public relations device to make its supporters' actual beliefs less clear and more acceptable to a broader audience”

- Mic: Explain the term on first reference and make it clear that the alt-right’s beliefs are synonymous with white nationalism
  - But don’t use “alt-left”
- BuzzFeed: Don’t use blanket terms for protests unless you’re sure they’re accurate

alt-right

- Mic: Conversations, conversations, conversations
  - Relied on tech + politics teams for expertise
  - Reached a collaborative conclusion
- As the term gained popularity during the 2016 election, the newsroom looked to copy for guidance

- BuzzFeed: Specificity!
- In general, be as specific as possible when describing protests and groups of protesters. Do not use terms like alt-right, white nationalist, leftist, or liberal as blanket terms unless you are sure they are accurate.

Body positivity & health

- Mic: Avoid gendered language regarding menstruation
- A person does not "die from AIDS"
    - Kaitlyn met with a writer to create a style email and an editor threw out the idea to publish it. This post was born.

- BuzzFeed: “Non-models” > “real people” or “everyday people”
- Be mindful of “plus-size,” “fat,” and “curvy”
- Avoid “healthy” and “diet”; use “healthier snacks” and language that doesn’t shame readers
- Be mindful of exercise regimens

Accent marks in names

- AP: Don’t use them because “they cause garble for some users.”
- Mic: Use ‘em!
  - Denying someone the accent mark is denying them the use of their real name
  - Some marks don’t render in the CMS, but we use those that do
- BuzzFeed: We agree and follow similar rules for the proper names of places!
  - E.g., Snæfellsjökull National Park vs. Snaefellsjokull National Park

Profanity

- Mic: Avoid unnecessary profanity. If necessary to include, spell it out or soft-censor with one asterisk.
- Never allude to slurs with terms like “the N-word”
    - Our story is a record of the event; we should represent it as fully as possible

- BuzzFeed: Spell out non-offensive, "casual-use" profanity
- C-word or n-word should generally be styled thusly
- Depends on tone of article, the brand, and/or region
- Single asterisk vs. multiple symbols

Internet ⟶ internet

- Mic: The internet is universal and open — not a clunky, defined thing you have to seek out
- Removing the capitalization reflects how the internet has become part of daily life
- Editor brought the idea for this capitalization change to Kaitlyn

- BuzzFeed: Avoid “The Internet” and “broke the internet”
- What is our responsibility to the brand vs. established house style?
- Pick your battles

Takeaways

- Representative language respects a person's humanity
- Copy editors are uniquely positioned to evaluate language choices relative to an outlet's goals or morals
- Open communication with writers, editors and management is key
- Culture change doesn't happen all at once — it starts with the details

Contact info

Mic

Ali Killian, deputy copy chief

@ali_killian

akillian@mic.com

Kaitlyn Jakola, copy chief

@KaitlynJakola

kaitlyn@mic.com

BuzzFeed Creative

Dan Toy, copy chief

@dw_toy

daniel.toy@buzzfeed.com

Sarah Schweppe, copy editor

@schweptaway

sarah.schweppe@buzzfeed.com