

Nearly half of Americans, 49%, believe that “our culture is superior to others,” according to a [2011 survey by the Pew Research Center](#).

As many media scholars, like [Marty Baron](#), have argued, journalism is the cornerstone of democracy, and with that role comes ethical responsibility.

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to see our culture as the standard and judge others against it, as defined by the American Psychology Association.

This can shape our ethical behavior by being an “aspect of our everyday life and deeply permeates our actions, such as our decisions regarding where to live, whom to marry, whom to have as friends, whom to vote for, and even whether in certain circumstances to die for our ethnic group,” according to “[Ethnocentrism: Integrated Perspectives](#)” by Boris Bizumic.

The Triangle is home to a diverse media landscape, including The Assembly, INDY Week, The News & Observer, and WRAL. Many journalists from these outlets adhere to ethical standards that help prevent ethnocentrism in their reporting.

The Assembly’s politics reporter Jeffery Billman was recently asked to weigh in on issues surrounding ethnocentrism. His responses highlighted the tension between national identity and racialized narratives in immigration reporting, pointing to how media choices can either challenge or reinforce dominant cultural assumptions.

Billman wrote on Latino communities, specifically with his article “[The Disappearance of Julio Zambrano](#).” He examined how Latino communities in North Carolina are too often covered only in the context of crime, disappearance, or legal status. He explained what journalists should ethically do.

Q: “Sometimes in the news, certain communities get reported on in really limited or stereotypical ways. Have you noticed that in local reporting?”

A: “Many news outlets tend to approach issues with narrow perspectives, and immigration is one example. This really came to light around 2020–2021 during the George Floyd protests and the broader anti-racism movement. At that time, there was a push within journalism not only to diversify newsrooms but also to diversify sourcing. Some conservative groups pushed back against this effort, but I think it ultimately makes journalism stronger.”

Billman expressed his concerns with the lack of diversity in perspectives presented by the media. He suggests it was a turning point when conversations about representation, structural racism, and equity moved to the forefront of public awareness, prompting a critical reevaluation of how the media operates.

He continued:

“You’re only as good as the people you talk to. If you don’t understand the communities and perspectives you’re reporting on, you can’t tell the story well. Unfortunately, in many daily, especially television-focused outlets, there’s still a “hit-and-run” mentality, quick, surface-level coverage. That approach often fails to capture the depth of issues, particularly those affecting minority communities. On the other hand, the outlets that are more diverse tend to do a better job covering ethnic minorities and telling fuller stories.”

Q: “Have you ever changed the way you approached a story after realizing it could reinforce a stereotype?”

A: “I’ve written pretty extensively about crime and criminal justice issues. There can be a tendency in that kind of reporting to reinforce stereotypes if you’re not careful. I think you have to be mindful of how you approach it. But I don’t think I’ve ever really changed the way I cover it.”

Q: “What advice would you give to student journalists who want to be more aware of cultural bias in their reporting?”

A: “Make sure you’re talking to a lot of people. I think the most important thing is to be mindful of your own perspective. A lot of well-educated, cosmopolitan folks tend to think we’re beyond our own biases, but that’s not true. Everyone has reflexes shaped by how they were raised. Education and empathy can help you see beyond that, but you have to be conscious of how your experiences may not reflect those of the people you’re covering.

That was something I had to learn, what might seem simple or even silly to me could be deeply important to someone else because of history or lived experience I don’t share. The key to good reporting is trying to understand people on their own terms, even the so-called ‘bad guys.’ Nobody really thinks of themselves as a villain; most people believe they’re acting for a reason that makes sense to them. The more you can understand that, the more you can step away from your own privilege and biases, and the better your reporting will be.”

Sanctimonious views in the news can further hinder democracy, according to Lena Gellar, a local reporter for INDY Week. This outlet is a progressive-leaning news outlet based in Durham, North Carolina.

Gellar has covered local events related to Gaza and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) protests, offering a perspective critical of how mainstream media often frames such issues. She was asked questions based on her experience reporting:

Q: Do you think local newsrooms do a good job representing marginalized or underrepresented communities? Why or why not?

A: “I think local news coverage is deeply influenced by who’s in the newsroom. Most local journalists do their best—they attend events, sign up for a wide range of press releases, and maintain diverse networks of sources. But there’s only so much you can do when you’re not part of a particular community. It can be hard to fully see which stories matter most or even recognize them in the first place.”

Based on her article “[Inside the Movement to Teach ICE Defense to N.C. Business Owners](#)”, she encountered a hot topic in U.S. politics. However, Gellar explores a grassroots response to immigration enforcement.

Q: Did you reflect on how dominant media narratives on immigration—often focused on crisis, victimhood, or criminality—might influence how readers interpret this story?

A: “I think that also has to do with who I know is reading the Indy. We have a more progressive, well-informed audience. If I were writing for a different publication, I probably would have taken more time to include background information. But with immigration narratives, what I kept hearing from organizers and business owners was this sense of wanting to be prepared—not just if federal agents come for immigrants, but if they start targeting other groups, too. So when I was writing, I tried to work in subtle reminders that these issues don’t just affect undocumented immigrants, they could end up impacting everyone.”

Marsha Gordon, a film studies professor at North Carolina State University, edited “[Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film](#)”. The book highlighted how filmmakers developed and audiences encountered ideas about race.

In an email, Gordon said:

Q: In your work on nontheatrical film, how did you see ethnocentrism shape the way race and culture were presented? Do you think similar framing still happens in today’s news reporting?

A: “There are definitely some parallels. The book I worked on discusses how film was used to frame racial narratives for specific audiences. And for news-reporting, stereotypical views continue to influence public perception by privileging dominant cultural narratives and sidelining alternative or marginalized viewpoints.”

Q: How important is media literacy in helping audiences recognize ethnocentric framing in both historical and modern media? What should we be teaching viewers and readers to look for?

A: “Media literacy is perhaps the most important skill for young people right now. We are all having to wade through a noisy, cluttered landscape of media produced by an array

of individuals and entities, including AI, with very little transparency about the veracity of information or the point of view of its creator or outlet. Learning how to assess and respond to media—news, social, online, broadcast, and print—and its framing of the world is crucial at a time in which representation in all of its forms—written, spoken, and pictorial—is also being fabricated or altered in ways that can distort reality and fan the flames of prejudice and distrust.”

Gordon’s take in the film industry is relevant for the media literacy needed for news-reporting.

These portrayals often reflected dominant cultural narratives and reinforced racial hierarchies, rather than challenging them.

This is directly relevant to discussions of ethnocentrism in news reporting, where mainstream media continues to privilege certain cultural perspectives while marginalizing others.

In Herbert Gans’s book [“Democracy and the News”](#), he addressed how a long-standing problem in journalism is the racial and class bias present in how the news is reported. The first thing that needs to be fixed is how people from marginalized backgrounds, especially racial minorities and those with low or middle income, are portrayed in the media.

”The first priority, and by now an old one, is to eliminate the continuing racial and class biases in the news, so that ethnic and racial minorities, as well as moderate and low-income people are no longer viewed through the lenses of white and elite stereotypes or reported on only when they turn their back on mainstream ways or commit crimes” Gans wrote.

Many stories about marginalized communities are still filtered through white, upper-class perspectives, rather than being told by members of those communities themselves.

The book [“Your Country, Our War”](#) by Katherine A. Brown highlights how Afghan journalists often rely on and incorporate U.S. and Western media narratives. This dependence can suppress the richness of indigenous viewpoints or local cultural nuances.

Brown gave an example of how Afghan journalists often feel conflicted when consuming U.S. stories that portray their own country as hopeless or shattered. These narratives can trigger deep emotional frustration and fuel nationalism among local reporters, who feel misrepresented or marginalized by Western framing.

That kind of narrative, she said, not only misrepresents the watchdog reality but can also spark nationalist sentiment among local journalists who feel sidelined by the Western lens.

A modern example would be when [the Trump administration’s decision to grant refugee status to white South Africans](#) while denying entry to Black and brown asylum seekers is more than

just a policy choice. It reflects a deeper issue in how stories (and whose stories) get told in Western media.

While outlets like WRAL report the facts of the Afrikaner refugee case, their coverage often reflects a broader critique of racialized immigration policy. As it is not pushing a political agenda, the framing and selection of expert commentary reveal how even fact-based journalism is shaped by ethical choices: what to emphasize, who to quote, and what context to include.

Because in a world where news crosses borders instantly, who tells the story and who gets left out matters more than ever.