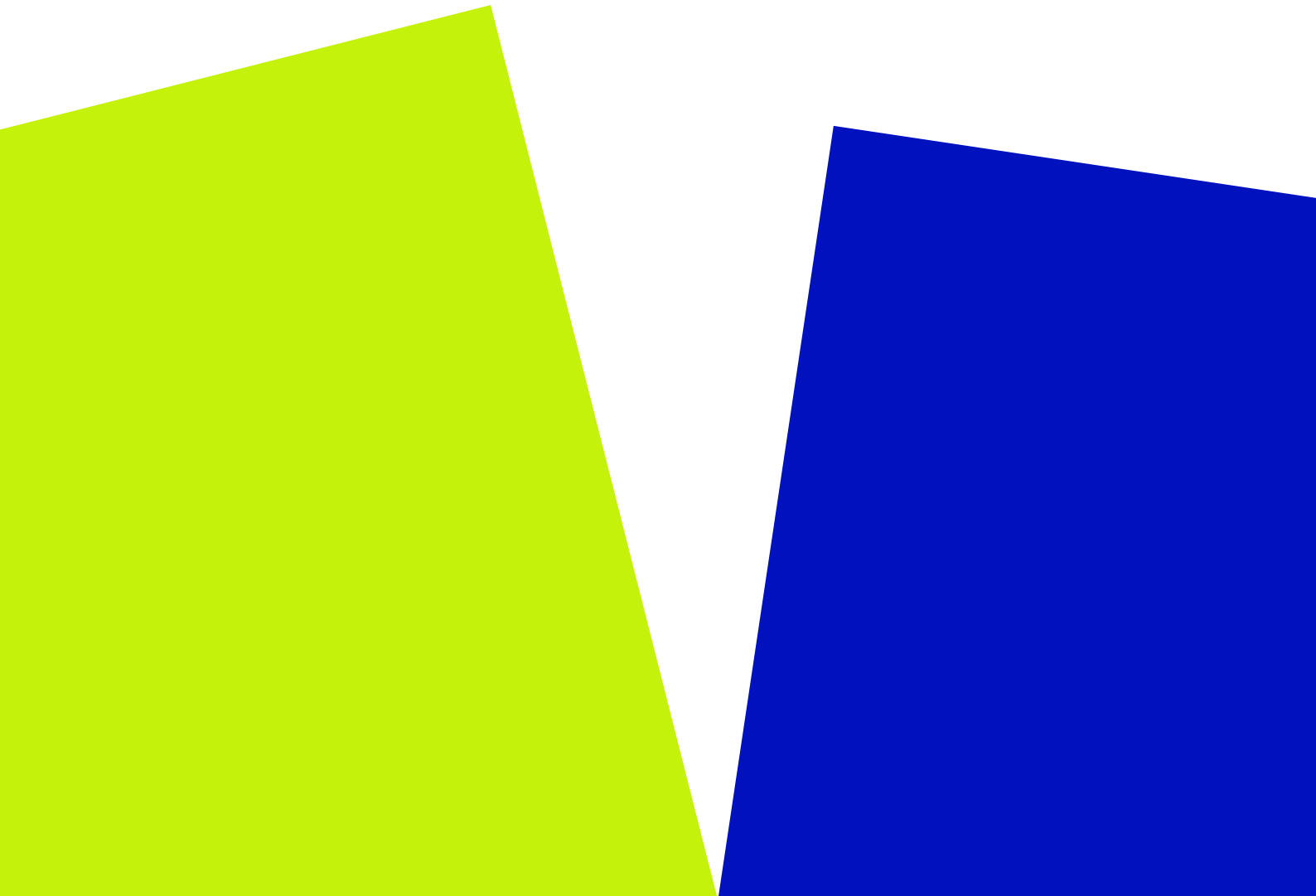




# Values-aware journalism

A practical toolkit

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*accumulate. Thousands of choices across hundreds of outlets shape what seems normal, naive or realistic in our culture.”*

## Why this toolkit exists

A housing reporter sits down to write about a redevelopment project. Do they lead with property prices, community impact or environmental effects? Who are their sources? Who will they go to for comment?

A crime reporter covers a knife attack in a local neighbourhood. Other outlets have called it a “reign of terror”, but don’t mention the youth centre that closed three years ago, or that child poverty here is among the highest in the country.

An environment editor feels they need to justify a piece about protecting woodlands. The headline: “UK’s trees worth £X billion to the economy”.

Every choice you make about what to cover, how to frame it and whose voice to centre shapes what matters to your audience. Journalists may see themselves as objective observers, simply reporting facts, but choices on angle, emphasis and context are, by their nature, selective in what they draw attention to. Your choices matter.

Over time, these decisions can shape what we all value and what we believe others value too. These effects accumulate. Thousands of choices across hundreds of outlets shape what seems normal, naive or realistic in our culture. But what if these choices don’t reflect what actually matters to people?

## The problem: the gap between what matters to people and what we see in our culture

Research like the European Values Study<sup>1</sup> consistently shows that most people value things like equality, community and caring for nature. These things feel good to us, they don’t depend on external recognition or reward. Psychologists call them ‘intrinsic values’<sup>2</sup>.

But research on traditional ‘news values’<sup>3</sup>, and our own research on how people perceive the media<sup>4</sup>, suggests our journalistic culture tends to foreground a different set of values, things like: wealth, status and power. These values encourage us to seek external approval or compare ourselves to other people. Psychologists call these ‘extrinsic values’<sup>5</sup>.

In the UK, Common Cause Foundation found that 74% of people say they prioritise intrinsic values over extrinsic ones. But 77% believe that other people are more motivated by things like wealth and social status. We call this the ‘values perception gap’<sup>6</sup>.

**74%**

of people prioritise intrinsic values over  
extrinsic

**77%**

of people believe others are more motivated  
by things like wealth and social status

This gap, between what we personally value and what we believe others do, has real consequences. The research shows it makes us feel less responsible for our communities, less likely to get involved, in everything from voting to volunteering, and less likely to support action on social and environmental issues. We also feel more isolated and that we don't fit in with wider society.

Journalism doesn't create this gap alone, but it is one of the key ways we get a sense of what others value. A persistent emphasis on extrinsic values can make people think these kinds of values are normal – and this has an impact on how people think and act, individually and collectively.

## **The opportunity: to better reflect what matters to people and strengthen our journalism**

If journalism's purpose is to serve communities by giving people accurate information to help them make informed decisions about their lives, then there is an inherent responsibility to reflect what matters to people. Journalists, perhaps more than any other profession, have the power to help close the perception gap.

The question isn't whether journalism is values-laden. It inherently is.

### **VALUES ARE PRESENT AT EVERY LEVEL OF NEWS PRODUCTION**

- Ownership level: Purpose and profit
- Editorial level: What makes something 'newsworthy'? Who decides what gets covered and how?
- Production level: How journalists work with sources, communities and each other day-to-day
- Story level: Individual framing choices

This toolkit is for journalists who want to better understand how values are embedded in their work, and what impact this has on their audience and the wider public.

This toolkit is about being intentional, transparent and reflective about the values your work communicates and the consequences of this. This, in turn, can help you make more conscious editorial choices that better reflect the values that most people actually prioritise, creating new opportunities for journalistic success.

## What this toolkit offers

### WHO THIS TOOLKIT IS FOR

This toolkit is for you if you are a journalist who wants to better understand how values are embedded in your work, what this means for your audience and the wider world, and you want to make more effective and conscious choices about the values you are elevating.

It is also for editors and newsroom leaders exploring how to embed values awareness in practice, and for anyone else who suspects journalism can better reflect what most people actually care about. It offers a framework and practical tools for doing that – at the level of individual stories, editorial conversations and newsroom culture.

### THIS TOOLKIT CAN HELP YOU

- Understand how values show up at every level of journalism, from individual word choices to media ownership
- Recognise patterns in your own practice and the media more broadly
- Make more conscious framing choices and be transparent about them
- Have more informed conversations with colleagues and editors
- Strengthen core journalistic functions: accurately informed citizenship, civic trust, democratic engagement

### THIS TOOLKIT CANNOT

- Solve structural problems like concentrated media ownership, lack of funding for public-interest journalism, or commercial pressures
- Give you power you don't have in your organisation

## A note on language

We use the term 'values-aware journalism' because, whether acknowledged or not, all journalism communicates things about what matters – values. The question is whether those values are conscious or unconscious, visible or hidden. These are the deep motivational priorities people hold, such as equality, security or creativity – distinct from 'news values', the professional criteria journalists use to judge newsworthiness, such as magnitude, relevance or celebrity<sup>7</sup>. The two interact, and we explore how in Part 2.

We also refer to the 'cultural footprint' of journalism. This is the impression that the media leaves on our shared sense of what matters and what matters to other people. This is similar to how a carbon footprint describes environmental impact.

## **Our values as authors of this toolkit**

We want to be transparent about where we stand. We believe journalism that more accurately reflects the intrinsic values most people prioritise is more responsible journalism. We also believe that rebalancing our culture away from an overemphasis on extrinsic values – wealth, status and power – is necessary if we are to meaningfully address the serious economic, environmental and social challenges we face.

But we also recognise that values awareness is useful whatever values a journalist or outlet chooses to foreground. The important thing is that the choice is conscious and honest, not habitual and invisible.

Our primary argument is one of accuracy. Research on news values, including work by journalism scholars Tony Harcup and Deirdre O’Neill<sup>8</sup>, consistently shows that things like the power elite, celebrity and conflict dominate story selection, despite other values mattering more to most people. Journalism that habitually reflects a narrow set of values to audiences is not neutral. It is inaccurate about what people care about and about the world we share.

Our second argument stands independently of the values audiences prioritise. Research in values psychology, explored in Part 1, has found that repeated exposure to extrinsic values in our cultural environment doesn’t just reflect those values, it reinforces them<sup>9</sup>, and crowds out the intrinsic values on the other end of the spectrum<sup>10</sup>. The measurable consequences include lower wellbeing, reduced trust in others and lower civic participation.

It is our belief that values awareness in journalism, and particularly work done to actively rebalance an overemphasis on extrinsic values, is both in the public interest and a route to stronger, more accurate journalism that better serves audiences and communities.

Given journalism’s commitment to pursuing truth and avoiding harm, we believe this work matters. And we hope this toolkit helps make it feel possible.

01

PART ONE

# Understanding values in journalism

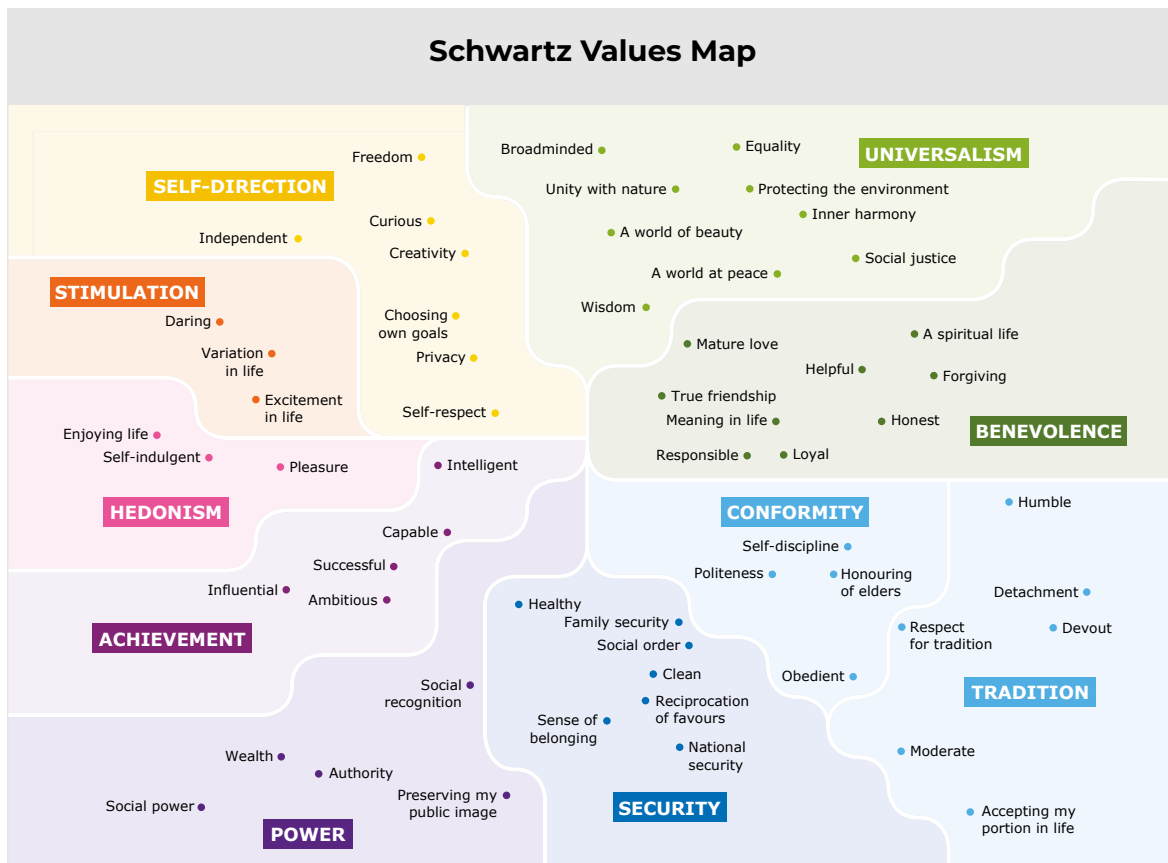
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## What we mean by values

In social psychology, values are **deeply held guiding principles that shape our attitudes and behaviours, and which are, in turn, shaped by the world around us**. We can think of values as an internal compass that influences what we pay attention to, what we care about and how we treat others.

### SCHWARTZ VALUES FRAMEWORK

One of the most widely used frameworks for understanding values comes from the social psychologist Shalom Schwartz, whose research drew on data from people in nearly 100 countries<sup>11</sup>. Schwartz identified a set of seemingly ‘universal’ human values – things like benevolence, equality, achievement, security, creativity and power – that are held across many different cultures, though in different proportions. Crucially, we can all access all of these values, but what feels most meaningful to us at any moment is influenced by our environment – including what we read, watch and listen to.



Redrawn with permission for **common cause** from Schwartz, S.H. (2006).

Find a full-size version of the map on page 56.

A 2025 study analysing half a million Facebook posts about COVID-19 from a range of Romanian and UK news outlets<sup>12</sup> found that values references were present across all coverage. Journalism is not values neutral. Every editorial decision – which issues get covered, how headlines are written, whose voices lead, what images accompany text – involves a judgement about what matters. Those judgments are shaped by values, whether they are the journalist’s own, embedded in the outlet’s culture, assumptions about the audience, or arising from commercial needs. All of these editorial decisions send signals about what matters in the world and what people should care about.

Journalism scholars Claudia Mellado and Constanza Gajardo found a significant gap between what journalists assume people want from them and what audiences themselves emphasise<sup>13</sup>. Journalists highlighted objectivity, independence and accuracy, while audiences wanted approachability, empathy and the ability to communicate in ways that emotionally resonate. Audiences described these as relational, humanistic qualities. This mirrors what Common Cause Foundation’s own research consistently finds. People care far more about connection, care and community than the media tends to assume or reflect.

## How values work

It’s hard to hold strongly opposing values at the same time. This is especially true of intrinsic and extrinsic values, which exist in a kind of tension.

### Intrinsic values

Inherently rewarding. They include: equality, social justice, interconnectedness with nature, creativity, curiosity, freedom and self-direction.

### Extrinsic values

Depend on external approval. They include: wealth, power, social status, achievement, public image and authority.

Research by a number of psychologists has found that everyone naturally holds both intrinsic and extrinsic values, but when extrinsic values are made more prominent in a person’s mind, it temporarily suppresses intrinsic ones, and vice versa<sup>14</sup>. We call this the ‘seesaw effect’. So when values on one end of the spectrum are elevated, those on the other side are diminished.

Part of why this happens is psychological. Extrinsic values align with deep survival instincts – we are wired to notice threats and seek rewards. Negative news, wealth narratives and power dynamics easily tap into these instincts.

Psychologists Kennon Sheldon and Tim Kasser found that when people feel like they're psychologically threatened – whether by existential, economic or social threat – they shift toward prioritising extrinsic goals, like wealth, status or appearance, over intrinsic ones, like community or personal growth<sup>15</sup>. This reflects something real about human attention and it means that extrinsic framings will often find a ready audience, which can reinforce their dominance without anyone consciously choosing that outcome.

#### EXAMPLE

A headline frames NHS staffing shortages as “costing taxpayers £X billion” rather than highlighting patient care or staff wellbeing. The implicit message? Economic value matters most. And repeated enough, across enough outlets, this framing shapes what feels like the ‘obvious way’ to cover health issues.

The problem isn't economics itself, it's when economic framing becomes the default, crowding out other legitimate grounds for concern, such as human dignity, community, or the inherent value of life.

We can think of values like muscles – the more they are used, the stronger they become. The opposite is also true. Consistent exposure to extrinsic values normalises them, making it harder for people to access the intrinsic values that research shows most people hold. And, when the world around us seems to tell us that things like wealth and power matter most, something happens – we start to believe that other people care more about these things than they actually do.

## The values we think other people prioritise – and why this matters

When people believe that others are motivated by self-interest, they are less likely to get involved in their communities, more likely to feel isolated, are less trusting, less supportive of collective and environmental action and less likely to volunteer. In this way, the gap between what people value and what they believe others value erodes the fabric of society.

We do not yet have a comprehensive study of UK media content analysed using Schwartz's framework, something that would allow us to map coverage alongside the values most people hold. However, the existing evidence all points in the same direction. Decades of research on ‘news values’, effectively the professional criteria used to judge newsworthiness (timeliness, conflict, impact, prominence etc), has shown over time that conflict, money, power and threat consistently dominate story selection<sup>16</sup>. These align closely with extrinsic values. Our own research found that most people see the media promoting extrinsic over intrinsic values too<sup>17</sup>.

**EXAMPLE**

“Extinction Rebellion protestors have blocked a main route into Bristol that leads to the M32. Commuters faced long delays after the campaigners gathered at Cabot Circus amid a series of protests.” Source: BBC

When a story about environmental protection is framed as good for business or not, and suggests this is what others care about too, this doesn't simply add context. It shifts the audience towards extrinsic values, making it harder for them to connect with the intrinsic reasons we care about nature, or nature's inherent worth.

**Values awareness and objectivity**

Some journalists might question whether paying attention to values means abandoning objectivity or introducing bias. However, the selection and framing of facts is always informed by values – and there is nothing inherently wrong with that – it's impossible to avoid.

The question is whether that choice is made consciously or unconsciously, and whether it is transparent or hidden. A journalist who never considers the values in their choices is not more objective – they are simply less aware of the assumptions shaping their work, and arguably less 'objective' as a result.

We must also note that many people already feel that the news doesn't present things impartially. For example, research by the Reuters Institute drawing on focus groups with disadvantaged communities across the UK, US, Brazil and India found that women and people from lower socioeconomic groups show a clear preference for news that openly addresses their perspectives and experiences<sup>18</sup>. This is because mainstream journalism has historically, if often unconsciously, reflected the viewpoints and interests of more privileged groups.

So-called neutral framing is rarely neutral when looking at whose experience it centres. Values awareness helps to make that visible.

*“A journalist who never considers the values in their choices is not more objective – they are simply less aware of the assumptions shaping their work, and arguably less 'objective' as a result.”*

### Values awareness is not

- imposing your politics on your audience
- abandoning facts or accuracy
- becoming an advocate for particular policies
- choosing sides in partisan debates

### Values awareness is

- recognising that all journalism involves values choices
- making those choices intentional and transparent rather than unconscious or hidden
- understanding the cultural footprint of your editorial decisions
- more accurately reflecting the values that most people hold

As journalism scholars Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel have argued<sup>19</sup>, and as media theorist James Carey wrote in his foundational work on journalism's civic purpose<sup>20</sup>, the function of journalism is not just to relay facts, but to help people understand the world and participate in it. Values awareness strengthens that function.

# 02

PART TWO

## **Values patterns in UK media**

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## Values patterns in UK media

Value emphasised	What it looks like	Example headlines	What it reinforces	Alternative approach
<b>Wealth</b>	<p>Leading stories with economic arguments.</p> <p>Justifying social goods through financial benefit.</p> <p>Measuring impact in pounds and GDP.</p>	<p>Oceans are world's seventh largest economy worth \$24tn, says WWF report (The Guardian, 2015)<sup>21</sup></p> <p>UK towns with more immigrants do much better economically, study finds (The Independent, 2021)<sup>22</sup></p> <p>Ageing and sick population will lead to £16bn annual tax rise (The Times, 2025)<sup>23</sup></p>	<p>The idea that things only matter if they have economic value.</p> <p>That economic arguments are more 'serious' than other grounds for concern.</p>	<p>Lead with community impact, human experience, the significance to the natural world.</p> <p>Include economic context where relevant but in service to these – not as the primary frame.</p>
<b>Individual achievement</b>	<p>Individual success stories.</p> <p>'Rags to riches' narratives.</p> <p>Rich lists.</p> <p>Celebrity and hero focus.</p> <p>Framing social problems as requiring individual solutions.</p>	<p>Forget relaxing - use your stress to become a high achiever (The Telegraph, 2016)<sup>24</sup></p> <p>The UK's top billionaires are self-made (Real Business, 2019)<sup>25</sup></p> <p>'Hero' tradesman saves community £5k bill after repairing crumbling Perthshire village hall roof for free (Daily Record, 2024)<sup>26</sup></p>	<p>The idea that change comes from exceptional individuals rather than collective action.</p> <p>That success is about beating others rather than lifting everyone.</p>	<p>Highlight collective efforts, community initiatives, shared successes and systemic solutions.</p> <p>Move away from focus on individuals, minimise shallow focus on celebrity.</p> <p>Avoid ranking people unless in service to pursuing greater equality.</p>

Value emphasised	What it looks like	Example headlines	What it reinforces	Alternative approach
<b>Security</b>	Emphasising fear and disagreement.	'It's outrageous!' Home Office 'inability' to control Britain's borders (GB News, 2026) <sup>27</sup>	A heightened sense of threat and insularity.	Explore root causes, common ground and collaborative solutions.
	Focusing on what divides rather than what connects.	Buses told to avoid Stockport estate being 'terrorised' by reckless gangs (Manchester Evening News, 2026). <sup>28</sup>	The world is seen as more dangerous and divided than it actually is.	Cover genuine threats without sensationalising.
<b>Institutional authority and social power</b>	Crisis reporting that defaults to threat and security framing.		A focus on symptoms rather than root causes.	Avoid amplifying isolated incidents disproportionately.
	Officials frame the story and institutional spokespeople lead.	Housing minister announces policy (paragraph 1) -> tenant reactions (paragraph 9)	A hierarchy of whose knowledge matters.	Rebalance who leads the story.
	Affected communities and people experiencing the issue appear late, as background, quoted for story 'colour' or emotion.	Ofsted report leads -> teachers' and students' experiences relegated to quotes at the end of the article	Expert knowledge is vital and the erosion of trust in genuine expertise is a serious problem. Yet, institutional voices are routinely given structural priority, while the knowledge that comes from lived experience is treated as supplementary.	Treat community knowledge as expertise.
		Police briefing -> affected families as human interest		Ensure legitimate institutional and lived-experience voices receive appropriate weight.
				Both have value and balancing them strengthens journalism.

Value emphasised	What it looks like	Example headlines	What it reinforces	Alternative approach
<b>Public image</b>	<p>Celebrity coverage framed as news.</p> <p>“Best dressed lists” and “most influential” rankings.</p> <p>Property coverage representing aspirational postcodes.</p> <p>Social-climbing narratives.</p>	<p>We live in ‘celebrities’ paradise’ where homes sell for £15MILLION (The Sun, 2024)<sup>29</sup></p> <p>No outfit is complete without a watch. These are the timepieces successful men swear by (Business Insider, 2025)<sup>30</sup></p> <p>This British university is officially the best in the world for 2026 (Time Out, 2025)<sup>31</sup></p>	<p>That worth depends on how you are perceived.</p> <p>That status and image matter more than substance.</p>	<p>Question these framings. When covering achievement or success, ask what values drove the person or project beyond status and wealth. What did they have to give up? Who supported them? What do they hope their work contributes to the world?</p>

## Why these patterns persist

These patterns have become invisible precisely because they are so familiar. Several factors reinforce them:

- 1 Durable social norms**  
 ‘This is how it’s always been done’ and departing from it requires justification.
- 2 The psychology of attention**  
 Because humans are hardwired for survival, we are naturally drawn to threats, rewards, and power dynamics, which makes extrinsic values attention-grabbing.
- 3 The feeling of neutrality**  
 Economic framing feels ‘neutral’ because numbers seem objective, ‘factual’, and appear to cut through opinion and politics. But a certain framing doesn’t become neutral just because it uses figures instead of words. Quantified data still carries choices about what to count, or whose ‘costs’ and ‘benefits’ matter most.

**4 Traditional news values**

Journalists are trained to select and frame stories according to professional criteria, known as news values, that reward certain kinds of content: conflict, threat, economic impact, prominence, timeliness. These criteria are not inherently problematic; they reflect genuine judgements about what audiences need to know. But they tend to systematically favour extrinsic framings. A story about a youth centre closure scores highly on news values if it is framed as a crime risk or a council budget failure. It scores lower if it is framed around community loss or children's wellbeing, even if the latter is closer to what people in that community actually care about. News values and values in the Schwartz sense are not the same thing, but they interact: the professional logic of newsworthiness quietly shapes which human values get amplified.

**5 Press releases**

PR professionals learn what framings travel furthest, and lean on established narratives around economic impact, institutional announcements and threat. Journalists working under time pressure encounter stories that arrive pre-framed. The conventions reinforce each other, not through conscious coordination, but through the accumulated logic of what works and is low risk in the current system.

**6 Time pressure**

Familiar framings are faster for us to understand. Saying 'this costs £X billion' requires no context. Saying 'this matters for community wellbeing' requires building a case. Under deadline pressure, the faster frame wins. There is also a more basic layer of practical constraint that shapes coverage before framing decisions are even made: how many reporters are available that day, whether a journalist has an existing relationship with a source who can speak quickly. These conditions reflect the material reality of understaffed newsrooms working to constant deadlines. Values awareness doesn't erase those pressures, but it can help journalists make more intentional choices within them.

**7 Media ownership interests**

Many media organisations are owned by individuals and corporations that benefit from a culture normalising wealth and power. This does not require editorial conspiracy – it simply reflects how the interests and commercial priorities of owners reinforce the same patterns.

Individual stories can appear insignificant. But the cumulative effect of thousands of stories, day after day, is powerful. If most stories frame social issues primarily through wealth and economics, celebrate individual achievement over collective action, emphasise threat and competition over common ground or root causes, centre powerful voices over affected communities, and present status and public image as aspirational, audiences come to believe that these matter more than intrinsic worth. This doesn't simply inform – it shapes our values and what we believe others value, which in turn shapes what we think and do.

# 03

PART THREE

## **Your context**



*you do  
in your  
context, with  
the power  
you have,  
to move  
toward more  
aware and  
transparent  
practice?"*

## Your context

Many journalists we speak to chose this career because they care deeply about the world – they're motivated to work in the media by their intrinsic values.

Many, however, work within organisations where profit and shareholder value dominate organisational priorities. This creates pressures that shape what values tend to be foregrounded in their editorial content. Making values conscious doesn't change that fact. But wherever you sit, you have some sphere of influence, even if it's small.

So what can you do in your context, with the power you have, to move toward more aware and transparent practice?

## Three contexts

### INDEPENDENT, PUBLIC-INTEREST AND READER-FUNDED OUTLETS

This includes reader-supported media, public-interest journalism, outlets with mission-aligned ownership, community media and non-profit journalism. Where ownership, organisational purpose and staff values align, the full framework in this toolkit becomes available. You can move through all three stages described in Part 4.

### JOURNALISTS WORKING IN COMMERCIALY DRIVEN ORGANISATIONS

This includes staff and freelance journalists working within organisations where profit maximisation and shareholder value dominate the organisation's objectives and influence editorial priorities. You face significant structural constraints. You may not be able to shift organisational values or ownership interests, but you still have agency within your sphere of influence. Part 4 describes how to work with that.

### THOSE WORKING FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE

This includes people developing new ownership models, advocates working on policy reform or public funding mechanisms, and those building alternative media infrastructure. To better serve the public, transformation of the UK media landscape will require changes beyond any individual outlet. This toolkit can sit alongside that work.

## A note on audiences

Some outlets intentionally serve audiences who actively seek financial or status information – the Financial Times is an obvious example. Values awareness doesn't mean all outlets prioritise the same values, it means being transparent and intentional about which values you are serving, and why, rather than defaulting to extrinsic framing unconsciously.

# 04

PART FOUR

## **The framework: three stages of values awareness**

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This framework describes three stages of values awareness, from unconsciously reinforcing certain values, to being transparent about values in ways that better reflect what most people care about. Think of it as a stairway rather than a checklist – each stage builds on the previous one and the movement is gradual.

Remember that your context (see Part 3) shapes which stages are accessible to you and how quickly you might move through them.

### The three stages at a glance

#### 1 Unconsciously reinforcing values

*"We just report the facts."*

#### 2 Becoming aware of the values in your work

*"We recognise that journalism is value-laden."*

#### 3 Transparent and responsible values practice

*"We name the values in our journalism and work to close the values perception gap."*

These stages are not about 'good' or 'bad' journalists. Most UK journalism currently operates at Stage 1, not because journalists are doing something wrong, but because values awareness is not part of professional training or culture, so the default is unconscious reinforcement.

## Stage 1. Unconsciously reinforcing certain values

### “We just report the facts”

At Stage 1, journalism operates with a genuine belief in values-neutrality and a professional commitment to objective reporting. Values are present in every choice, but go unnoticed.

### WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- You tend to think of your work as ‘reporting the facts’ and your professional identity is built around being an ‘objective observer’
- You have not thought much about values – your own, your organisation’s, or those embedded in professional norms
- You tend to follow established professional conventions about how stories are told – conventions that most journalists in the industry share
- You are not aware of patterns in how your coverage foregrounds certain values over others and the impact that this has on mainstream culture

Most journalists are at Stage 1 and this is entirely understandable. If values awareness has never been part of your training or professional culture, you cannot choose it. Stage 1 is a starting point, not a judgement.

### STAGE 1 IN PRACTICE

A story about a new housing development quotes the local council, a property developer and an economist, noting that average house prices are expected to rise 8% following the build. A family on the housing waiting list, who have been in temporary accommodation for two years, appears in paragraph 10 as a ‘human interest’ angle. Nobody made a conscious choice to frame housing as an asset class. It reflects how housing stories have been written for decades. But the cumulative effect is to suggest that its primary purpose is wealth generation, not shelter, community or the right to a stable home. This isn’t an argument against economic information, it’s an argument against economic framing as the default organising logic.

### MOVING TO STAGE 2

#### Start asking:

- What values might this framing foreground?
- Is there another way to tell this story?
- Whose perspective am I centring and why?
- What am I assuming about what matters to my audience?

## Stage 2. Conscious awareness of values

### “We recognise journalism is value-laden”

At Stage 2, you begin to see values everywhere in your work and you can't unsee them. This awareness creates choices.

#### WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- You recognise that all journalism involves values choices
- You notice how editorial decisions signal what matters and how the media helps shape cultural values
- You understand the values perception gap and the media's role in it
- You are beginning to question why 'we've always done it this way'
- You may feel some tension between your growing awareness and your existing practice

#### STAGE 2 IN PRACTICE

A crime reporter notices that coverage always emphasises punishment over rehabilitation and starts asking editors: 'Could we try a different framing?'. An environment editor questions why climate coverage always leads with economic arguments. A freelance journalist realises pitches framed around community care get less traction than those framed around local conflict, and begins documenting this pattern.

## Two possible paths from Stage 2

Once you are aware that journalism is values-laden, you face a choice about what to do with that awareness.

### PATH A) USING VALUES TO INFLUENCE OUTCOMES

This means treating values as tools to achieve predetermined ends – selecting or framing them strategically to persuade or to serve particular goals. This happens across communications generally and journalism is not immune. It takes two forms:

#### Using intrinsic values to serve extrinsic goals

This is where intrinsic values language is used primarily to serve profit, status or power. For example, in journalism this could look like a publication invoking values such as accountability, truth-telling or giving voice to ordinary people in its branding, editor's letters, or public positioning, while its actual editorial decisions are driven by click metrics, advertiser relationships or proprietorial interests. The values are real in the rhetoric but absent in the practice. Research by academics Rachel Ruttan and Loran Nordgren suggests that when values language is deployed manipulatively, people become cynical about it, which weakens their connection to those values over time<sup>40</sup>.

#### Using extrinsic values to pursue intrinsic goals

This can happen when a journalist understands that an outcome connected to an intrinsic value – refugee welfare, say – is newsworthy because it matters to audiences or carries genuine social importance, but uses an extrinsic frame to make the story feel acceptable to editors, or meet the norms of 'serious' journalism or mainstream culture. For example, framing a story about refugees in terms of economic contribution because that feels more legitimate than leading with human welfare directly. We see the same with stories justifying protection of nature for its value in GDP. The intentions may be sound, but these framings reinforce the idea that people only matter if they are economically productive, and perpetuate the perception gap by assuming audiences need extrinsic reasons to care, when research shows most do not.

Both paths lead away from Stage 3, for different reasons. The first erodes trust as it can feel manipulative to audiences and 'cheapens' intrinsic values. The second inadvertently reinforces the value imbalance it is trying to work around.

*core values?  
Which values  
drew me to  
journalism?  
When does  
my work feel  
aligned with  
my values,  
and where  
does it feel in  
tension?"*

### PATH B) AUTHENTIC VALUES AWARENESS

This path involves genuine inquiry into your own values, your organisation's, those present in your work, those held by your community and those within the world around you. What this looks like in practice:

- **Personal enquiry:** What are my core values? What values drew me to journalism? When does my work feel aligned with my values, and where does it feel in tension?
- **Practice examination:** What values does this framing foreground? Whose voices am I centring and why? Am I assuming that my sources or audiences are primarily motivated by power, wealth or social status, when community or care might be closer to the truth?
- **Newsroom conversations:** Questioning defaults with colleagues, noticing patterns across coverage, identifying gaps between intentions and impact.
- **Organisational awareness:** What values does my organisation actually prioritise compared to what it states? What values are reflected in how we define 'success' or 'good'?

Common experiences at this stage include discomfort, as seeing values everywhere can be unsettling, tension where journalists' own values feel at odds with their outlet's practice and a sense of isolation, yet, curiosity to learn more and find others working on similar questions.

### MOVING TO STAGE 3

The shift requires a commitment to making values visible rather than keeping them implicit, and taking active steps to close the perception gap.

## Stage 3: Transparent and responsible values practice

### “We name the values in our journalism and work to close the perception gap”

At Stage 3, values awareness becomes visible and active. This stage has two related but distinct dimensions:

#### Being transparent

Telling your audience what values shape your editorial choices, whatever those values are. Transparency is about honest process.

#### Being responsible

Going a step further by actively working to foreground the intrinsic values that research shows most people hold but that the media tends to underrepresent, and in doing so, helping to close the perception gap. This is Common Cause Foundation's declared position: we believe this is what responsible journalism, in service of an informed public, looks like. But we offer it as a perspective, not a directive.

A journalist can be at Stage 3 while choosing to foreground different values from those we recommend from values research. The key thing is to do so consciously, transparently, and in honest service of their audience. Values awareness is a tool, responsibility is a choice about how to use it.

The Responsible Media Forum's long-running Mirrors or Movers project poses a question that sits at the heart of Stage 3: does media content simply mirror society – reflecting existing norms and values back to audiences – or does it move it, actively shaping how people see the world and each other<sup>32</sup>? The Forum's research suggests the latter. Stage 3 is about being honest that journalism shapes culture, and taking responsibility for doing so more intentionally and transparently.

Foregrounding intrinsic values means making a professional judgement, grounded in evidence about what people actually hold dear, that coverage should reflect more of human experience than extrinsic framings allow. That judgement sits alongside, not instead of, the editorial instinct to pursue stories that matter even when audiences have not asked for them.

The values-aware approach connects to other shifts happening in journalism. For example: change-centric journalism<sup>33</sup>, which defines success by the impact a story facilitates; constructive journalism, a solution-focused approach that creates a more accurate picture of reality by focusing on responses to problems in coverage; and engaged journalism, which focuses on listening to a community's needs and involving them in the reporting process.

Such approaches share the understanding that journalism that is honest about its role in shaping public life, and intentional about how it does so, is more valuable to audiences, communities and democracy than journalism that pretends to be a neutral relay of facts.

### WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE

- Being explicit: you name the values that shape your coverage – your own and your outlet's – rather than leaving them implicit
- Being transparent: you let audiences know how and why editorial decisions are made, in whatever form is available to you
- Being consistent: what you say about your values is reflected in what you publish
- Being active: you make conscious choices in editorial decisions to consider what values are being foregrounded
- Being socially responsible: you actively work to close the perception gap by foregrounding the intrinsic values that research shows are underrepresented and matter more to people
- Being open: you create space for audiences to reflect on what matters most to them about the issues you cover

### Stage 3 in practice: four approaches

Values awareness can take different forms depending on your role, outlet and level of influence. Some approaches are personal and informal, others require editorial or organisational backing. The following examples show four ways that being more transparent and responsible with values choices can begin to take shape in practice.

### APPROACH 1: PERSONAL AND INFORMAL DISCLOSURE

The most immediately available form of transparency is personal, which can mean naming your values and your approach in spaces you control. This does not require editorial agreement or organisational sign-off, and it builds trust with audiences through being honest about the lens shaping your work.

#### **What this looks like in practice, and why it matters for accuracy and public service:**

- A freelance journalist adds to their website: "I cover migration by centring the experiences and voices of people on the move. I believe this produces more accurate journalism because it reflects the human reality behind policy debates that institutional sources alone cannot provide."
- A local reporter includes in their newsletter: "I cover this town because I live here and care about it. I want to be transparent that my coverage prioritises community wellbeing and civic participation. I think that's what local journalism is for."
- A political journalist notes on their social media profile: "I try to cover politics through the lens of what it means for people's daily lives, not just as a game of winners and losers. I think that serves my audience better and produces more useful journalism."

In each case the journalist is not just disclosing a preference, they are making a case for why their approach produces better journalism.

### APPROACH 2: TRANSPARENT EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

At an outlet level, values transparency means publishing clear, honest articulations of the values guiding editorial decisions, not simply a standard editorial policy covering accuracy and impartiality. It means offering an explanation of purpose, what the outlet is for, what it seeks to foreground and why. This could operate across the whole outlet or individual beats. It's worth being clear about how this differs from what the industry often calls 'editorial values' – a term used interchangeably with editorial ethics and standards. Those standards address how journalism is conducted. However, a story can meet every standard of accuracy and impartiality while still unconsciously foregrounding certain values; transparent editorial principles go further. It is also honest to say that this is a developing area. Some outlets have gone a long way toward making their values explicit; others have taken important steps in that direction without yet using the language of values awareness specifically. Both matter, and both are worth pointing to.

## Outlets making their editorial purpose explicit:

### Positive News

Exists to report on progress and possibility, contributing to a more complete picture of the world and helping audiences engage with it more constructively. It publishes its editorial approach openly and offers a transparent values position. It tells audiences what it foregrounds and why, and it reflects a conscious move beyond problem-focused framing that dominates most news.

### LAist (USA)

Reporters and producers create personal mission statements explicitly outlining the topics each journalist is committed to covering, sharing their personal connections to their work and why it matters<sup>34</sup>. This makes values visible at the level of individual journalists within an organisational context, not as a branding exercise, but as a genuine account of what each person is trying to do and for whom.

## Outlets building structural transparency into individual editorial decisions:

### Aftonbladet (Sweden)

Embeds 'ethics boxes' directly within articles, offering short explanations of specific editorial decisions, such as why a suspect was or wasn't named, or how sources were verified. The outlet has found that many users want to click and read the information. Those who clicked were more likely to understand and agree with the editorial decisions, and this was connected to users perceiving the content as credible. This is process transparency rather than values transparency in the fullest sense. It makes editorial decisions visible without necessarily naming the values behind them. But it demonstrates that explaining why you made a specific editorial choice, at the moment it matters, builds rather than undermines credibility. An environment desk that publishes a brief note alongside a story – "we led with the human experience here rather than the economic cost, because we believe that more accurately reflects what our readers care about and produces stronger journalism" – is doing the same thing at the level of values.

### De Correspondent (Netherlands)

Built its editorial model around transparency about journalists' worldviews and moral convictions<sup>35</sup>. Their founding principles include an explicit commitment that journalists will be transparent about their values rather than claiming neutrality. This is framed as a route to more honest and accurate journalism, not as advocacy. The organisation publishes annual editorial and financial reports to members, and reporters have public notebooks showing their working process. This is probably the closest existing model we know of to what values-aware editorial principles look like in practice.

Having explicit values transparency – naming what human values an outlet seeks to foreground, why and what effect it hopes that has on audiences and culture – is still rare. Most of these examples are steps toward it and this toolkit's aim is to help move it further.

### APPROACH 3: INVITING AUDIENCE REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

A distinct and accessible form of values transparency is inviting audiences into a conversation about values – not just telling them what you foreground – but creating space to explore what matters to them in the issues you cover. This is different from the previous approaches because it treats audiences as active participants rather than recipients of a disclosure.

This can be as simple as a question at the end of a newsletter or article: "What matters most to you about this issue – the economic impact, the effect on your community, the environmental dimension, something else entirely? We'd love to hear." Or it might mean holding a listening session with communities you cover regularly to find out what they value about the place or issue you're reporting on.

This does several things at once. It signals to audiences that their values are relevant and welcome in journalism – countering the implicit message that only institutional or economic perspectives count. It gives journalists genuine information about what their audience actually cares about, which strengthens future coverage and helps close the perception gap from the ground up. And it builds the kind of relationship between journalists and communities that research consistently shows is connected to trust and loyalty.

There is a further dimension worth noting. Common Cause Foundation's research, drawing on work by values psychologists including Greg Maio and colleagues, shows that values can be temporarily activated by communications and experiences, and that repeated activation strengthens them in the same way that muscles grow stronger with use<sup>36</sup>.

Inviting audiences to reflect on and articulate what matters most is therefore not just a listening exercise. The act of engaging people's values may itself help to strengthen them and increase people's sense that they are shared. For journalism, this kind of dialogue about values is not only good practice for understanding your audience, it may directly contribute to closing the perception gap.

Research by journalism scholars Sue Robinson and Patrick Johnson with Trusting News found that when journalists held genuine listening sessions with disengaged community members – asking what journalism gets wrong, what causes harm, what would build trust – more than two-thirds said the conversations had built trust with the outlet and its journalists, and a third said they were considering subscribing<sup>37</sup>. The conversation itself was the act of values-aware journalism. It treated people's experiences and perspectives as important, and they felt it.

## APPROACH 4: STRUCTURAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The most developed form of values transparency is structural. This means building accountability mechanisms into how an outlet operates so that transparency is ongoing rather than occasional, and audiences have genuine means of holding media organisations to account. This goes beyond what any individual journalist can do alone – it requires editorial and organisational commitment.

### What this looks like in practice

Community newsrooms The Ferret and Bristol Cable have embedded member accountability into their founding structures. Based in Scotland, The Ferret is run as a cooperative where members elect its board and approve its editorial guidelines. Bristol Cable is member-owned, with regular, open editorial meetings where readers can question and challenge coverage decisions. In both cases, transparency about values is not a communication strategy – it is a governance structure. The values that guide editorial decisions are clear and accountable to the people the journalism serves.

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism's Bureau Local project developed a model of collaborative, community-rooted reporting where journalists work alongside communities on stories they identify as important, and with its methodology made visible throughout. The explicit aim is journalism that serves the people it covers, with accountability built into the process rather than declared after the fact.

Pittsburgh's PublicSource outlet developed a 'Talking to Journalists' postcard in multiple languages, particularly for immigrant communities, explaining people's rights and what to expect when approached by reporters<sup>38</sup>. This is transparency in service of the communities journalism claims to serve, making the process legible to those with least power within it. It is a structural choice that reflects a values position – that the people journalism covers deserve to understand and navigate it on their own terms.

### Potential benefits of Stage 3

- **Supporting trust:** Research suggests transparency does not automatically increase trust<sup>39</sup>. However, thoughtful transparency can help audiences understand how journalism works and evaluate it more fairly. Over time, this openness can contribute to trust, particularly when it is backed by consistent practice rather than declarations alone.
- **Strengthening accountability:** Publicly stating your editorial commitment and approach to values – about what you are trying to do and why – gives audiences a clearer basis for holding you to account. Transparency allows people to assess whether coverage aligns with stated values commitments, and creates stronger incentives for consistency and reflection.

- **Avoiding values-washing:** Clear, practice-based transparency makes it harder to rely on vague or symbolic claims about values. Explaining how values shape real editorial decisions demonstrates they are operational rather than rhetorical.
- **Serving audiences better:** Journalism that foregrounds what truly matters to people is journalism in genuine service of an informed public, and supports the engagement, trust and reader loyalty that increasingly underpin sustainable media business models.
- **Helping to close the perception gap:** When journalism more accurately reflects what people value, it counters the widespread but mistaken belief that most people are primarily motivated by self-interest, thus fulfilling one of journalism's core purposes of helping us understand each other and the world we share – empowering the informed.

### Potential challenges and responses at Stage 3

#### FEAR OF LOSING 'OBJECTIVITY' CREDIBILITY

Some journalists might worry that naming values undermines their professional standing. But transparency about values is more honest than pretending they don't exist and influence us. All journalism involves values choices – being explicit about yours is a mark of rigour, not partisanship.

#### ORGANISATIONAL RESISTANCE

There may be a concern that editors or leadership will be uncomfortable with explicit values talk. Start small. Pilot with one story, one beat, one newsletter. Build evidence that values-aware journalism is consistent with high-quality, rigorous reporting.

#### THE COMMERCIAL QUESTION

The industry trend toward relationship-building, audience-first approaches and reader revenue all point in an encouraging direction. As the listening sessions research described in Approach 3 shows, journalism that genuinely reflects what people care about builds the loyalty and reader revenue that financially sustainable media increasingly depends on. There is still uncertainty here, but the direction of travel is clear, and values-aware journalism sits squarely within it.

# 05

PART FIVE

## **Applying values awareness in your role**

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Now that you understand the three stages of values awareness, here's how to apply this framework in your specific professional context.

## Starting points for every journalist

- 1 Understand your own values.** Identify what matters most to you, and reconnect with why you chose to work in the media. Use the values map to identify your five most and five least important values. Notice when your work feels aligned with your values, and when it feels in tension. This awareness is the foundation for everything else. Tool 1 in the next section can help with this too.
- 2 Make values-aware framing choices.** Where you have editorial freedom, and most journalists have some, notice which values you default to and consider alternatives. For example, perhaps include economic data where relevant without making it the frame. Choose language thoughtfully: "residents" rather than "taxpayers", "people affected" rather "locals caught up in". Balance institutional voices with those most directly affected.
- 3 Notice patterns.** Track which pitches get accepted and rejected. Notice which frames your editors favour. This awareness helps you navigate your context more effectively.
- 4 Have strategic conversations.** When the moment is right, question defaults with editors. Frame suggestions around strengthening journalistic goals: "This story is currently structured around the minister's announcement. I'd like to try leading with what the people affected are experiencing and what they say they need – I think that gives readers a fuller and more accurate picture, and it's more likely to build genuine engagement with the issue. Can we experiment?".
- 5 Be transparent in whatever ways are within your reach.** In your social media bio, your newsletter, your 'about' page, or in direct conversation with sources and audiences – name the values that shape your approach. You do not need organisational permission to be honest about your own practice.
- 6 Find others.** Colleagues in your newsroom or professional network might be wrestling with the same questions – connecting with each other helps.

## For independent, public-interest and reader funded outlets

Where ownership, organisational purpose and staff values align, you can move through all three stages of values awareness. In addition to the starting points above:

- 1 Assess which stage of values awareness you are currently at.** Which stage describes most of your current practice? Where are the gaps between stated values and actual practice? Tool 1 in the next section includes a self-assessment to help with this.
- 2 Build shared understanding.** Run workshops with staff on values and their role in journalism. Create space for journalists to explore their own values. Discuss the perception gap and the media's role in it.
- 3 Audit your coverage.** Review recent stories through a values lens. What patterns dominate? Where are you unconsciously elevating certain values? Is the content written assuming that your audience prioritises extrinsic values?
- 4 Pilot values-aware approaches.** Start with one beat or section. Give your team freedom to experiment. Document what you learn.
- 5 Create support structures.** Build values considerations into your editorial process. Consider establishing a 'values circle' for ongoing reflection. This is explained in Tool 6. Protect time for community-relationship building.
- 6 Shift success metrics.** Add qualitative measures alongside quantitative ones, such as tracking community feedback, whether sources return, depth of audience engagement beyond clicks. Tool 7 offers guidance on this.
- 7 Publish your editorial values framework.** On your 'about' page or in a newsletter, explain what values guide your editorial choices and why. An editorial values framework is a short, honest statement of what your outlet is for, what values it seeks to foreground, and how it makes decisions. It is distinct from a standard editorial policy – where a policy sets rules, a values framework explains purpose. Consider how to create or adapt one for your outlet, and invite audience feedback.
- 8 Build networks.** Connect with other outlets doing this work to share learning and resources, and create a community of practice. Contact Common Cause Foundation – we can connect you with others working in this space.

## For journalists in commercially driven organisations

You face real structural constraints. You cannot change ownership interests or editorial culture on your own. But you have agency within your sphere of influence. The starting points above apply in full. Additional strategies:

- 1 Document what you observe.** Keeping informal notes on which framings your outlet favours, the values underlying them – and what that pattern reveals – is itself a form of values awareness. It can also inform future conversations with editors and help you better navigate the context you're working within.
- 2 Practice values transparency where possible.** In social media bios, newsletters, websites and even in conversations, explain your approach, and name your values and subsequent framing choices. Be transparent with audiences even if your organisation isn't. There are some great examples of freelancers doing this: journalist Ariel Zirulnik's website and Editor-at-large Kara Swisher's ethics statement.
- 3 Prioritise your wellbeing.** Acknowledge the tension between your values and organisational practice, and set clear boundaries around what you will or won't do. Focus on what is within your control and recognise progress, however incremental.

## For editors and newsroom leaders

You have genuine power to shift culture, often within constraints, but significantly nonetheless. You shape what gets covered, how it is framed and whose voices are centred.

- 1 In editorial meetings:** Add values considerations to story discussions. Ask "What values does this frame foreground, and what does the evidence say most people in our audience actually care about?" Question defaults: "Why do we always lead with wealth/power/social status/achievement framing?"
- 2 In commissions and assignments:** Encourage journalists to be conscious of the values dimension in stories and give them as much time as possible for genuine community relationship building.
- 3 In feedback:** Recognise work that reflects what audiences care about, not just what gets clicks. Coach reporters on values-aware approaches.
- 4 In hiring and development:** Be explicit about the organisation's values in recruitment. Provide training on values literacy and awareness.
- 5 In metrics:** Look beyond reach and clicks to assess whether your coverage reflects the values you aim to foreground. Weigh community feedback, representation of different voices, and the depth and quality of audience engagement.

## **For those working for structural change**

If your work focuses on changing media ownership models, advocating for public funding reform, or building alternative media infrastructure, this toolkit is most relevant at an organisational level. For example, in auditing coverage, developing editorial values frameworks or demonstrating what values-aware journalism looks like in practice. Together, these approaches can help build evidence that different ownership models, funding structures and organisational setups lead to different kinds of journalism.

The core arguments for changing editorial practice embedded within this toolkit – that journalism shapes culture, that the current emphasis on extrinsic values causes measurable social harm, and that there is an audience for journalism that better reflects what most people care about – also support the case for structural reform. The Responsible Media Forum's work, the growing evidence base on audience trust and loyalty, and the examples of member-funded and cooperative outlets in this toolkit all point toward the kinds of structures that make values-aware journalism sustainable rather than exceptional.

Contact Common Cause Foundation if you would like to connect with others working on structural change in UK media. We can connect you with the broader values movement, and with researchers and advocates working on media reform.

06

PART SIX

# Practical tools



## Seven tools for values-aware practice

This section provides tools for helping you be more values aware in your daily practice:

- 1 Self-assessment**  
Understand your own values and where you sit on the three-stage framework of values awareness
- 2 Story-level checklist**  
A before/during/after guide for individual stories
- 3 Editorial meeting prompts**  
Questions for pitch meetings and planning discussions
- 4 Framing alternatives guide**  
Concrete examples of how common frames can be rebalanced
- 5 Spotting instrumental vs. genuine uses of values**  
How to tell when values are used honestly or to influence outcomes
- 6 Building a values circle**  
A structure for peer support and reflection
- 7 Measuring what matters**  
How to track the impact of values-aware stories

# 01 Self-assessment

## Step 1. Reconnect with your own values

Look at the Schwartz values map at the back of this toolkit or downloadable at [commoncausefoundation.org](http://commoncausefoundation.org). Identify your five most and five least important values. Notice where they sit. Do they lean more toward intrinsic (Benevolence, Universalism and half of Self-direction categories) or extrinsic (Power and Achievement categories)? Are they grouped together or spread apart? Reflect on how your day-to-day work connects to these values and where it feels in tension with them.

### QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

What values drew you to journalism originally?

What matters most to you about your work?

When does your work feel most meaningful?

When do you notice a gap between your own values and what you are being asked to do?

## Step 2: Assess your current stage on the values-aware journalism 'stairway'

Read through these indicators and consider honestly where most of your current practice sits. Most journalists recognise themselves most strongly in Stage 1 or early Stage 2. This reflects the professional environment, not a personal failure.

### STAGE 1 INDICATORS

- Your instinct is that good journalism means reporting facts and keeping yourself out of it
- You haven't thought much about values, whether your own, your organisation's, those embedded in professional norms, or in the world around you
- You tend to follow established conventions about how stories are told without questioning them
- You haven't noticed consistent patterns in how your coverage foregrounds certain values over others

## STAGE 2 INDICATORS

- You recognise that all journalism involves values choices
- You notice patterns in coverage, including your own and others'
- You question inherited conventions and are seeking more alignment between your values and your practice
- You are aware of the perception gap and the media's role in it

## STAGE 3 INDICATORS

- You explicitly name values in your work and are transparent with audiences about your editorial approach
- You actively consider values in editorial decisions
- Your stated values match your actual practice
- You take active steps to close the perception gap

### Step 3: Identifying your next step

#### If you're at Stage 1

- Begin noticing values in your work and other people's
- For each story, ask yourself: what values might this framing foreground?
- Read about values and their role in media – Common Cause Foundation's resources are a good starting point, found at [commoncausefoundation.org](http://commoncausefoundation.org)
- Next milestone: move to Stage 2

#### If you're at Stage 2

- Deepen your understanding of your own values and your organisation's values
- Connect with others exploring these questions
- Experiment with different frames for stories and notice the effect
- Next milestone: move to Stage 3

#### If you're at Stage 3

- Deepen your transparency practices
- Seek greater alignment between personal, editorial and organisational values
- Build and share evidence of the difference values-aware journalism makes

## 02 Story-level checklist

Use this before, during and after reporting.

### Before reporting – framing

- How do my own values relate to this story – am I conscious of them?
- What values might different frames for this story foreground?
- Am I defaulting to wealth/achievement/power/social status framing when other frames might serve the story and the audience better?
- Am I assuming my sources or audiences are primarily motivated by self-interest, when care for others or community might be closer to the truth?

### Before reporting – sourcing and research

- Who is most directly affected by this issue?
- Am I treating affected people as active voices in the story, or primarily as illustrative background?
- Am I defaulting to institutional spokespeople?
- How can I give genuine weight to both institutional and lived-experience voices?
- What do people actually value about this issue, versus what I assume?

### During reporting

#### ASK SOURCES

About their values as well as their positions: “What matters most to you about this?” or “What do you hope happens here?”. Listen for what people care about – you may find it differs from what institutional framings suggest.

#### CONSIDER DIFFERENT ANGLES

Consider whether solution-focused or community-oriented angles are relevant to this story, as options that may reflect the fuller picture or information that is most important or useful for the audience. If there is evidence of collective action, cooperation or community response, ask whether it belongs in the story.

**In writing – language**

- Am I using “taxpayers” when “residents” or “community members” is more accurate, for example?
- Am I framing costs before human or environmental impact?
- Am I treating people primarily as economic actors when other aspects of their experience are more relevant?

**In writing – structure**

- Do I lead with the values most relevant to the story, or with the frame that came pre-packaged from a press release?
- Are the voices of those most affected given genuine prominence, or do they appear late as context?
- If community action or cooperation is part of this story, is it treated as a core part, rather than a minor or token element?

**After publication**

- What values did this story foreground? Did that feel intentional?
- Did this story make the perception gap wider or narrower?
- What feedback did you receive from audiences, sources, colleagues?
- What would you do differently next time?

## 03 Editorial meeting prompts

Use these in editorial meetings, planning sessions and story discussions.

### For editorial meetings

- What values does each potential angle for this story foreground?
- Are we defaulting to our usual frame and is there a reason to?
- What angles might connect to what truly matters to people on this issue?
- Are we using values honestly, or mainly to achieve a particular effect?

### For planning discussions

- What patterns dominate our recent coverage in this area?
- Are there angles we consistently miss that would reflect more of what our audiences actually care about?
- What community relationships would strengthen our reporting here?
- Are we unconsciously foregrounding extrinsic values in our coverage of this area?










## 04 Framing alternatives guide

This guide is not arguing that economic, security or achievement framing is wrong – these are legitimate parts of reporting. Nor is it suggesting these are either/or choices: in practice, a rail strike for example will generate multiple stories, and the economic impact story has its place. The aim is to help journalists notice a possible default bias towards these frames, and to ask whether the fuller picture is also being told, and whether angles that reflect the values that research shows most people hold – things like equality, belonging, curiosity, care for nature and creativity – are given equal weight. The examples below are offered in a spirit of curiosity rather than correction.


### Wealth → Human, societal and environmental impact

-  "Rail strikes cost UK economy £X million a day"
-  Stories focusing on patients, carers and commuters; features on rail workers' motivations and working conditions
  
-  "Trees worth £X billion to economy"
-  "Communities across UK coming together to protect local woodland"
-  "Why young people are demanding action on climate change"
  
-  "Arts funding provides £5 return for every £1 spent"
-  "How community theatre brings neighbours together"
-  "Why creativity matters for wellbeing"
  
-  "Ageing population will cost NHS £X billion"
-  "How communities are supporting elderly neighbours"
-  "What does dignified ageing look like?"
  
-  "Migrants contribute £X billion to UK economy"
-  "New residents bring creativity, care and community connections to [place]"
-  "Families separated by immigration system share their stories"





**Power and authority → Equality, social justice and community**



-  "Minister announces new housing targets"
-  "Tenants respond to proposed housing changes: 'We need homes, not investment vehicles'"
-  "What renters and first-time buyers want from housing policy"
  
-  "Ofsted rates school 'inadequate'"
-  "Teachers, parents, students share what makes good education"
-  "How one school put wellbeing before test scores"
  
-  "Police chief announces crackdown on antisocial behavior"
-  "Community explores root causes of youth crime"
-  "How restorative justice brought victim and offender together"

**Public status and social image framing → Self-direction and equality**







-  "University league tables: Top 10 for graduate salaries"
-  "Students share what really matters when choosing university"
  
-  "30 under 30: Young entrepreneurs to watch"
-  "What motivates people beyond salary and status?"
  
-  "UK's most desirable postcodes revealed"
-  "What makes a good neighbourhood? Residents weigh in"

**Individual achievement framing → Collective action and shared success**

-  "School tops league tables again"
-  "How schools across city are sharing best practices to lift all students"
  
-  "PM wins debate, poll shows"
-  "What did we learn about parties' policies on the NHS?"

-  Focus solely on individual star players
-  "How team's collective approach led to success"

**Security and threat → Root causes and collective response**

-  "Residents terrified as knife crime spikes"
  -  "Community explores what would make neighbourhood safer"
  -  "Youth workers on what young people need"
- 
-  "Border crisis: Illegal crossings surge"
  -  "What drives people to make dangerous journeys? Refugees share their stories"
  -  "How coastal communities are responding to new arrivals"

## 05 Spotting instrumental vs. genuine uses of values

Use these questions to assess whether values are being used authentically in a specific piece of journalism, an editorial approach, or an outlet's overall practice. They are most useful when applied to your own work, but can also help you analyse the work of others.

### Is intrinsic values language being used to achieve extrinsic goals?

- Is values language mainly used in branding, marketing or headlines, while the actual journalism tells a different story?
- Is there a gap between the communities mentioned in an outlet's claims about values and those genuinely represented in the reporting?
- Are these values being highlighted more to support commercial or reputational goals than to reflect how the journalism is actually produced?
- Would the same editorial decisions be made if the values framing was removed?

### Does the work use extrinsic framing to serve intrinsic goals?

- Is an economic or status-based argument used to justify something the journalist or outlet in fact judges to be important for reasons of care, equality or community?
- Does the framing suggest the subject, such as people, nature or a community, only matters if it's useful or profitable, rather than valuable in its own right?
- Is there a gap between the evident motivation behind the story and the frame used to tell it?

### Is this authentic?

- Does the editorial practice reflect the stated values across coverage over time not just in one story?
- Are communities invoked in values statements genuinely present in the journalism, as active voices rather than illustrative examples?
- Is there evidence of genuine discomfort or self-questioning when practice falls short of stated values?
- Is there transparency about the tensions between values and commercial or editorial pressures?

The most useful question to sit with is the last one in each section. Authentic values practice rarely claims perfection, it acknowledges difficulty and stays honest about it.

## 06 Building a values circle

A values circle is a small group (three to six people) of journalists who meet regularly to explore values in their work, share challenges and strategies, and support each other's growth. It is a community of practice, not a training programme.

### How to start

**Find your people:** Colleagues in your organisation, freelancers in your professional network, journalists at other outlets doing similar work. A mix of roles, experience and backgrounds is helpful. Meet regularly to create a space for honest reflection without judgement. Maintain confidentiality about what is shared.

#### A SIMPLE STRUCTURE

- 1 Check-in:** How is each person feeling about the alignment between their own values and the work they are doing?
- 2 Deep dive:** One person brings a challenge, question or story for the group to explore together.
- 3 Close:** What is each person taking away?

# 07

## Measuring what matters

Traditional metrics (reach, clicks, shares) don't capture what values-aware journalism offers. The journalism industry is already moving toward richer measures of engagement, loyalty and impact because these better reflect what sustainable media looks like. Values-aware journalism is very much aligned with these shifts. Some approaches to consider:

### Community feedback

Do communities feel accurately represented and heard? Are relationships with sources and communities deepening over time? Practically, this might mean following up with sources after publication, creating simple feedback mechanisms, or holding periodic listening sessions with communities you cover regularly.

### Quality of engagement

Is your journalism prompting thoughtful conversation in comments, audience feedback, social media? Are audiences returning? Is your work being shared beyond its usual audience?

### Empowerment and participation

Has your journalism helped people understand an issue better and act on things they care about? Has it contributed to community initiatives, debate or participation, whether for a geographical location, or a group based on common interests?

### Staff alignment and wellbeing

Do journalists feel greater alignment between their own values and their work? Does this affect their sense of purpose or how they experience their work day to day?

### Coverage patterns

Are you noticing a shift in the balance of the values that your coverage foregrounds over time? Is your content more accurately reflecting the values that most people prioritise?

# 07

PART SEVEN

## **Next steps and resources**

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## Starting small

Values-aware journalism is a practice that develops over time – you don't need to transform everything at once.

### This week

Complete the self-assessment. Start to notice values patterns in your own and other people's work. Choose one story and apply Tool 2.

### This month

Experiment with one alternative framing. Have one conversation with a colleague about values. Document what you're learning.

### This year

Find two to three other journalists to form a values circle with. Build evidence of the difference that values awareness makes. Reflect on changes in your practice.

## Building networks

Common Cause Foundation has been working on values and social change for many years, with organisations across the charitable, cultural and media sectors. We can connect you with a broader values awareness movement, share resources and training, and support you in taking this work forward.

In the UK, we are currently working with Positive News and Byline Times on what editorial values transparency looks like in practice. We will share learning from those partnerships as they develop.

### GET IN TOUCH

**Email us:** [info@commoncausefoundation.org](mailto:info@commoncausefoundation.org)

**Visit our website:** <https://commoncausefoundation.org/>

**Connect with us on LinkedIn:** <https://www.linkedin.com/company/common-cause-foundation>

**Find us on Bluesky:** <https://bsky.app/profile/commoncause.bsky.social>

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## Contributing to this work

This toolkit is a living document. We want to hear from you with examples of values-aware journalism in practice, strategies for working within constraints, evidence of impacts, questions and challenges, and suggestions for what would be most useful. Get in touch at: [info@commoncausefoundation.org](mailto:info@commoncausefoundation.org).

## Final thoughts

Values-aware journalism isn't about getting it 'right' or judging current practice. It's about becoming more aware of the choices already present in your work and taking the opportunity to develop your practice through intention and continuous learning.

*"UK journalism needs this work. Communities need journalism that is more transparent and responsible for the values it amplifies and that reflects and strengthens the values that most people actually hold: belonging, equality, care for nature, creativity, freedom. You're part of making that happen."*

*Elsie Roderiques, Values in the Media, Common Cause Foundation*

This work asks something real of you. For your attention, honesty and a willingness to sit with discomfort if and when your practice and your values don't quite line up. That takes courage, especially within institutions and systems that are not yet set up to support it. But you are not doing this alone. Every journalist who asks these questions, experiments with a different frame, or has one honest conversation with a colleague is part of something larger. We are building this together and we are genuinely glad you are here.

## Acknowledgements

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## About Common Cause Foundation

Common Cause Foundation is a values-based change organisation. We build the evidence, tools and partnerships that help civil society, media and culture better reflect what most people actually care about. This toolkit is part of that work.

[commoncausefoundation.org](http://commoncausefoundation.org)

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# Schwartz Values Map



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