

# DEBUNK THE MYTHS

## *A challenge to preconceived notions*

**A**NY PROJECT ON RACE WILL BE PARTLY motivated by the desire to challenge preconceived notions. Some projects have been very specific about which preconceived notions they wanted to attack — repeating in print or on the air the oft-cited, but inaccurate, stereotypes.

For the media, stereotypes are a double-edged sword. On one hand, how can you correct misperceptions if you don't address them head on? On the other, how can you print statements you know are false, even if your intention is to disprove them?

Different projects dealt with this dilemma in different ways and some editors are still conflicted about how they tried to solve it.

Nevertheless, the techniques they employed are worth exploring because readers and audiences may unconsciously fall back on old stereotypes as they read, watch or listen to projects designed to open their minds on race relations. If stereotypes are debunked in the package, they are more difficult to cling to.

### ASSAULTING STEREOTYPES

Perhaps the boldest assault on stereotypes came from *The Charlotte Observer* in its 1997 series "Side by Side." A special section

called "About Race" was tucked into the paper on the series' first day. In the margins of every page of that section were printed oft-repeated accepted assumptions about race, followed by evidence that refuted them. The feature had its own logo — a human eye surrounded by the words "Perceptions that Keep People Apart."

Typical was the statement: "*The government gives immigrants special privileges: They don't have to pay income taxes yet are eligible for welfare.*" Immediately underneath, reporter Tim Funk wrote, "*Federal law requires anyone who holds a legitimate job to pay income taxes — regardless of whether he or she is a U.S. citizen ... States are given the choice of whether to cut noncitizens out of their aid programs.*"

The simplicity of the language suggested that the paper realized most of its readers knew better and the item was aimed at only a small segment that might actually believe immigrants don't pay taxes.

Still, these formulations attracted the attention of most readers, as then-Public Editor Fannie Flono recalled. "People loved that," she said in an interview. "It was the most in-your-face kind of thing we could have done."

"We were trying to create an opportunity to talk honestly and openly about race, con-

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**About Race**  
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 The Charlotte Observer  
 A special section devoted to our community's discussion on race and ethnicity

**Talking about race is hard work, but it needs doing**  
**By Tony Tomlinson**  
 There will be people who will say that you are a racist if you write about race. But that's not the point. It's not about you. It's about the community. It's about the people who live here. It's about the people who are trying to make a better life for themselves. It's about the people who are trying to make a better life for their children. It's about the people who are trying to make a better life for their community. It's about the people who are trying to make a better life for our country. It's about the people who are trying to make a better life for our world.



**Older people know race relations have improved. Young people, who deal across race lines more, see more racism. Here's what you say about race relations, and how hard it is ...**  
**Bridging the divide**  
**By David Perlmutter**  
 Many people have a hard time understanding why some people are so angry about race. They see the news reports about the violence in the streets and think, "Why are people so angry? It's not like there's anything wrong with the way we live here. We're a diverse community. We're a tolerant community. We're a community where people of all colors and backgrounds live together in peace and harmony."

**PEOPLE ASK**  
 "Most blacks are on welfare."  
 Not true. In 2005, the year for which the most reliable data are available, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 28.5 percent of African Americans were recipients of welfare benefits. That means 6.3 percent of blacks were not receiving food stamps. And in Florida, the state with the highest percentage of welfare recipients, only 35.5 percent of blacks were on welfare.

**Call with questions**  
 Call with comments  
 Join a discussion  
 Integration in the suburbs  
 Memories of segregation  
 Test yourself

The Charlotte Observer tried to dispel racial myths by printing, then refuting, them in a special section.

front fears and misconceptions. We thought one way to help the process was to get people to understand what is true and what is not true about what they believe about race," she said.

Not everyone at the paper agreed. Cliff Harrington, a project editor, said he strongly opposed putting the negative perceptions in print and still thinks, generally speaking, it's not a good idea. "It's like printing an obscenity," said Harrington of the myths. "Your explanation for doing it has to be really good."

Harrington said he believes the sidebars were effective because of the very careful attention paid to the layout. It was impossible to read the negative assertion without seeing — in a quick, short sentence — the repudiation.

Admittedly ambivalent about the feature, Harrington does not recall the response as being generally favorable.

"We got a mixed reaction," he said. "Some readers thought we didn't do a good enough job of dispelling those attitudes and some readers thought we actually supported them."

For instance, Funk's response to the myth, "Blacks don't want to work hard," was hardly a ringing assurance of a vigorous work ethic in the black community. "The rates of black adults who work aren't far behind the rates for white adults," he wrote.

In another example, the paper chose to debunk the myth that "White-controlled media present distorted images of blacks," a premise that has been supported by recent research.

In the end, Harrington was satisfied that the sidebars had served a useful purpose but he advised caution and rigorous editing when using the technique.

## DEFLATING MYTHS

The Portland Press Herald used a similar technique for its 1999 series "The Changing Face of Maine." Each of the four parts carried a sidebar headlined "Debunking Racial Myths," which started with a clearly labeled "Myth," followed by a clearly labeled "Truth."

The Press Herald was aiming at a slightly more sophisticated level of misconception.

"Espousing racial and ethnic diversity is no more than an exercise in political correctness; diversity itself offers no real benefits," read one myth.

Editor Jeannine Guttman said she wasn't aware that there had been concerns about The Observer sidebars but had found them to be a good educational device and decided to use it in the Press Herald series. The feature proved to be popular with readers, who even praised it in letters.



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Some editors are still conflicted about whether they dispelled racial myths with the feature, "Perceptions that Keep People Apart."

Not everyone likes having myths exploded. WHRO-TV and WVBT-TV in Southeast Virginia were criticized when they reported on the involvement of black Africans in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The stations, though, used the controversy over their reports as an opportunity to convene community discussions on the subject of reconciliation.

The *Lexington Herald-Leader* took a slightly different approach in its effort to dispel stereotypes. As part of its "Distant Neighbors" series in 1995, the paper wrote about how people acquire misconceptions and why they are so enduring.

The paper didn't repeat commonly held assumptions but it recounted poll results showing that, for instance, 62 percent of whites rated blacks as lazier than whites, 79 percent of blacks think whites believe they are superior, and 68 percent of Asians think Hispanics tend to have bigger families than they can support.

The paper then quoted psychologists explaining that people cling to stereotypes as mental shortcuts — "energy-saving devices," one expert called them — to avoid the hard work of making individual judgments about people. The story noted that racial prejudice is linked more closely to lower educational levels than to any other demographic category.

Perhaps the biggest myth of all was exploded by reporters at KRON-TV and the *San Francisco Chronicle* in their 1998 series "About Race." Both reported that race itself is largely a misconception, quoting a number of scientists who say that there is no genetic basis for race and that it is a social and cultural construct that has very little to do with the actual genetic make-up of a human being.

This concern was not exactly "news" since it's information that scientists had long agreed on. Yet the *Chronicle* story got picked up across the country and the KRON story drew a huge response from viewers.

"I don't know why it wasn't known," said Craig Franklin, who produced the KRON story. "I don't know why it still isn't part of our national understanding and dialogue."

## THE PROJECTS

### KRON-TV, San Francisco: Underscoring Genetic Similarities

Craig Franklin took his friend, Chris Johnson, to lunch one day in 1997, searching for insight into race issues. Franklin, a television producer for KRON-TV in San Francisco, had just been assigned a five-part series on race and, as a white male, he figured he needed advice.

It was an auspicious beginning. Johnson, an African-American artist and photographer, supplied a revelation that rocked Franklin's view of race. That revelation, in turn, shattered the preconceptions of thousands of viewers in the Bay Area when it aired as the basis for part one of Franklin's series.

"He said, 'Let me give you a quiz,' " Franklin recalled recently. The quiz goes something like this:

*"You have four men — one tall, one short and two of similar height, one white and one black. Which two are more genetically different: the tall and short men of the same race or the men of similar height but different skin colors?"*

If you aren't familiar with the KRON series, you'll probably react the way Franklin did. It was obviously a trick question and the answer Johnson was looking for was that the tall and short men are more genetically different than the black and white men. Perhaps, like Franklin, you don't really believe it.

It's true — and its implications are even greater than they may first appear.

#### FOCUSING ON SIMILARITIES

Franklin's efforts to get the definitive scientific answer to the quiz led him to the further discovery that, in terms of genetic biology, race, itself, is a misconception.

That became one of the focal points of the KRON series and one of the major impacts on viewers.

"That is the one thing people carried away from that series and still remember and it changes people," said Franklin. "I don't think anything we've done has the impact that one piece of information has. It changes the paradigm."

Franklin went back to his office after his lunch with Johnson, intent on proving Johnson wrong about his genetics quiz. He phoned biologists at local universities, some of whom were working on the human genome project.

To his shock, they confirmed what Johnson had said. Of the 30,000 genes that make up a

human being, six control skin color and every human being has the same six genes.

“I kept looking for loopholes,” said Franklin, “but everyone we went to confirmed that there’s no scientific basis for defining humans by racial categories.”

To illustrate this discovery, Franklin decided to use Johnson’s example. Through a KRON intern who was a student at the University of San Francisco, Franklin found four men who fit the description in the quiz. He shot video of them in the studio and, in the edited piece, asked viewers to pick out the two who were the most genetically different.

He invited Dr. Sylvia Spengler of the University of California, Berkeley, to explain the answer. “*The genetic basis of race ... isn’t,*” said Spengler. “*Race is something we do to each other. It has nothing to do with what DNA does to us.*”

In truth, this fact should not have been that dramatic a revelation. It was a conclusion that has been accepted by geneticists, biologists and other scientists for decades. Franklin, in fact, found a World War II-era Army pamphlet about getting along with fellow soldiers that refers to the fact that just six genes control skin color. And yet, in 1998, it *was* news.

KRON decided to lead its highest-rated newscast, at 6 p.m., with the story. This decision was remarkable for two reasons. One, it was “sweeps week,” when rating services chart the viewership



“About Race” involved the anchors as they talked about race and efforts to bridge the racial divide.

for each station and most TV newscasts are leading with stories about issues that they believe will capture the widest audience. A story about the scientific foundation of race looked like an act of ratings suicide.

Second, Franklin’s piece was 13 minutes long. Never before, former News Director Dan Rosenheim said, had KRON run a 13-minute piece in its 6 p.m. newscast, let alone led with it. But Rosenheim, now at rival KPIX, said he doesn’t underestimate viewers. “I think we can do serious stuff at some length in a way that is interesting and compelling,” he said.

Rosenheim found some vindication when the ratings came out. KRON finished the six o’clock hour a strong second with a 7.0 rating — higher than the previous year’s February rating.

Still, for all those viewers, plus thousands of others who read a partner piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the fact that people’s genetic similarities are greater than their differences, that the notion of race itself is a critical stereotype, is still a surprise. It is a fact that probably bears repeating until it becomes part of the national understanding.

## WHRO-TV, WVBT-TV, Norfolk, VA: Tracing the Slave Route

For hundreds of years, the west African country of Benin was ravaged by slavery. Its people were captured and sold, then transported to lives of systematic dehumanization and unthinkable brutality.

It is all true. Yet, it is not the whole truth.

The whole truth is more complex, more painful and — as journalists Van Dora Williams and Kelly Wright discovered — not always welcome. But, as they also discovered, the truth can have a profound healing effect.



*WHRO producer Van Dora Williams found the painful truth about slavery had a healing effect on viewers.*

Williams is a producer for WHRO, Norfolk’s public television station, and Wright an anchor at the Fox station, WVBT. They teamed up to cover the Conference on Reconciliation called in Benin in 1999. Benin President Matthieu Kerekou invited 300 people — including African-Americans and representatives of slave-trading nations.

The agenda seemed fairly straightforward: Former slave-trading nations would apologize to African-Americans for the wrongs their forebears had suffered. But there were surprises in store for the African-Americans in attendance.

“I owe you the truth,” Kerekou told those assembled. The truth was that he, himself, was among those apologizing, along with the president of Ghana and 50 tribal kings of west Africa.

All of them, they confessed, had ancestors who perpetrated slavery. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, regional rulers would wage war with rival tribes and seize the defeated to sell to white traders in exchange for such commodities as wood, gunpowder and tobacco.

“Everything there was a complete shock to me,” said Williams, who acknowledged struggling at times to remain an objective observer documenting the event. “I think that most African-Americans consider Africa utopia. Your culture, your roots are there; that’s where you belong. And then to find out these kings went into partnership with Europeans to sell their own people definitely made you think twice.”

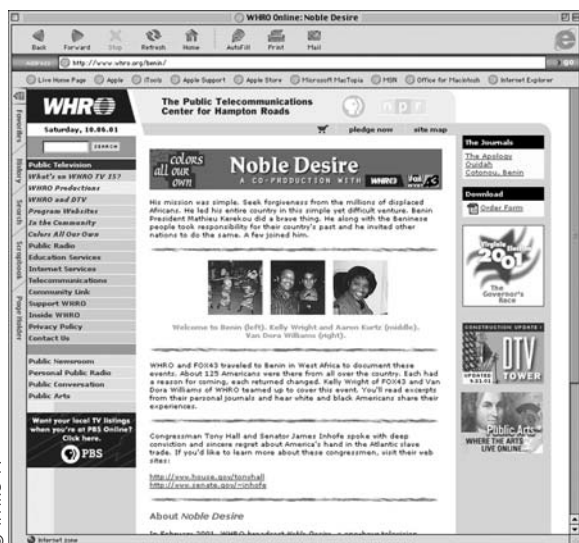
## A NOBLE DESIRE

Williams and the other visitors were in for more surprises. They were taken on a tour of the route the slaves took out of Africa: down the dusty road where the slaves were marched, past the mass grave where those who died or became acutely ill were buried, to the auction block where they were sold and then to the hut of zomai — an African word for dark — where they were packed together in total darkness to prepare for the trip at sea.

The tour was so vivid that blacks and whites broke down and sobbed, sometimes hugging one another. Williams and Wright recorded all the emotion and information. Wright produced a three-part series for the nightly news. Williams produced two documentaries — one a half-hour, one an hour. Both called their productions “Noble Desire,” as Kerekou described his own desire to apologize to African-Americans.

Williams’ version was used in an effort called “Colors All Our Own,” WHRO’s contribution to the Television Race Initiative. WHRO and five other public television stations are using their programming as frameworks for community dialogue and problem-solving around the issue of race.

Though Williams and Wright worked together and presented much of the same material, reaction to their stories was markedly different.



“Noble Desire” explored the role of black Africans in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It became the basis for community dialogues involving 700 people over six weeks.

“IT WAS HIGHLY EMOTIONAL MATERIAL SO THE OPPORTUNITY FOR IT TO SPARK DISCORD WAS THERE BUT, LARGELY AS A RESULT OF THE WAY WE WENT ABOUT IT... IT SUCCEEDED”

—MARY PRUESS, WHRO STATION MANAGER

“When I just put the promo on the air [for my series],” Wright said, “I got a call from a gentleman who was very upset. He said it was another lie from white America; that I should open my eyes and take my blinders off.”

WHRO, on the other hand, got largely positive reaction. “We were getting feedback [saying], ‘We’re so glad someone is telling this story,’” said Station Manager Mary Pruess. Pruess was so intrigued by the range of responses that she met with a group of facilitators working in the area of race relations to see whether the material might support a wider conversation.

“They all thought it would be worthwhile,” Pruess said, “so we spent the summer and fall planning a series of community dialogues using the program as a springboard.”

By the end of the six-week discussion series, nearly 700 people had participated in more than 20 dialogues.

“It was highly emotional material so the opportunity for it to spark discord was there but, largely as a result of the way we went about it with skilled facilitators and the good will of our partners, it succeeded,” Pruess said. “Public TV, as a convenor, is something that is a very important principle from my perspective. It’s an example of how public broadcasting can make a difference in the community it serves.”

Williams said she found the discussions fascinating. Far from relieving white viewers of guilt, as some black critics had feared, the programs seemed to create an impetus for white participants to offer their own apologies. “It was amazing to see,” Williams said. “In a two-hour period, people’s perspectives changed on a very important part of their history.”

At one showing, Williams said, a white woman stood up and spoke to her directly. “She said, ‘On behalf of white Americans, I apologize. Please forgive me for what happened to you,’ ” Williams recalled. “I said, ‘Thank you. I accept.’ And afterward we hugged.”

Community coordinator Roz Whitaker-Heck said the dialogues were in no way designed to elicit apologies but, in three different sessions, people said they were sorry for the misdeeds of their ancestors.

“We had a lot of discussions prior to this,” Whitaker-Heck said, “and people would say, ‘We talk this topic to death. What are we going to do about it?’ We felt reconciliation is possibly an answer to that question. [The dialogues] prompted people to start thinking about not waiting for things to happen through legislation or other kinds of structured ways but how each individual can affect change just by extending a simple apology. Many people felt that even though it sounds simplistic, it could be the basis for a new beginning and a new understanding about race.”

### Chapter Tips: *Dealing with Stereotypes*

- Use caution with stereotypes; it’s easy to bruise feelings.
- Expect resistance to the facts.
- Be careful what data you use; it may cut both ways.
- Remind your audience often that race is more genetic fiction, than scientific fact.