

TELL YOUR OWN STORY

A cornerstone to credibility

WHEN CARL CROTHERS ARRIVED AT the *Winston-Salem Journal* in 1995, he was the first new editor the paper had hired in 18 years. He had that rare opportunity newcomers get to be totally honest about the institution he was leading because he could also believably promise a fresh start.

One of Crothers' innovations was to invite three well-respected black civic leaders to speak to his staff about the *Journal's* coverage of Winston-Salem's black community.

"They pretty much took us apart with their analysis of stories, pictures, headlines and so on," recalled Crothers, executive editor. "Not that the room wasn't full of standard-issue, liberal-minded white reporters with good intentions. It's just that they were sort of blind. They never really paid much attention to the fact that we were not presenting an image of the whole community and its diversity. If there were images of blacks in the paper, they were often offensive."

It was a polite meeting, Crothers said. There was no hostility. But he remembers turning to face his staff when the speakers left.

"They were just sort of stunned," he rec-

ollected. "They sat there in silence, all these educated, well-intentioned people. It was devastating."

The fresh start came in the form of "Dividing Lines," a two-month series in 1998 about race relations in Winston-Salem. A part of that series was a *mea culpa* for the paper's own history.

"We felt we couldn't honestly have any credibility with readers, especially black readers, if we didn't lay out our own sordid history," said Crothers. "And that really was the source of a lot of animosity. We seemed to symbolize everything that was wrong with race relations in general."

REVEALING SORDID PASTS

Not every paper has such a burden going into a project on race relations but the *Journal* is not an especially extreme example. The *Savannah Morning News* recently came to grips with the buried secret that it had helped conceal plans for the lynching of two black men in the early part of the 1900s. The two papers that became the *Times Record News* of Wichita Falls, Texas, editorialized against integration and went to extraordinary lengths to prevent any photos of blacks from appearing in their



The Winston-Salem Journal explored its own lack of diversity and a shameful chapter from its past to lend thoroughness and credibility to its 1998 series "Dividing Lines."

pages until the late 1960s. In a 1997 series, the paper reminded readers of that history.

Nor is this strictly a Southern phenomenon. Northern papers may not have used their own pages for racist ends, but few news organizations anywhere in the country can claim a flawless record on coverage, recruitment and hiring for diversity.

The Day of New London, Connecticut, included a story about its failure to diversify its staff as part of the series "Two Races, Two Worlds" in October 1999.

"This story, like most of the articles published in The Day, was written and edited by whites," the story began. *"The Day's content largely reflects the efforts of people who work and carry on their lives in white worlds ... most of the information [the paper] publishes comes from whites."*

Some newsrooms that have diversified



have found, when they looked, that staff interaction was affected by race. KRON-TV in San Francisco turned the camera on itself for a follow-up series about race and the media in 1999 and found racial misunderstandings persisted despite the station's efforts.

The Akron Beacon Journal made a similar discovery when it wrote about race relations among its staff as part of its 1993 "A Question of Color."

The important lesson of these efforts is

Times Record News

Wichita Falls, Texas -- Monday, March 17, 1997 -- Vol. 96, No. 208 -- 50¢

Union may strike against Lockheed

Kindred Handley
Wichita Falls, Texas (UPI) — The Lockheed Martin Corp. union is set to vote on whether to strike against the aerospace giant, which is the largest employer in the city.

Satellite plan could bring 'Net to world

Telecast Corp. is planning the launch of 840 satellites.

Elizabeth Weber
The launch of a new generation of satellites is being planned by Telecast Corp., a company based in Wichita Falls, Texas.

Tirana mourns victims of nation's violence, anarchy

Albanian government tries to take control as thousands flee



Part II: History
Even without violence and explosive racial unrest, segregation and less visible forms of racism have been and remain woven into the city's fabric.

Separate lives

History highlights chasm



Steve Chism
Wichita Falls, Texas (UPI) — The city's history is a story of two worlds, one black and one white, that have never truly merged.

Newspaper struggles to overcome legacy

Wichita Falls, Texas (UPI) — The Times Record News is a newspaper that has struggled to overcome a legacy of racial segregation and bias.

© TIMES RECORD NEWS.

The Times Record News in Wichita Falls, Texas, disclosed a shameful record on racial coverage in its 1997 series "About Face."

that these news organizations didn't let their shortcomings undermine the credibility of their work. Instead, they enhanced their projects by shining a light on themselves as well as their community.

By investigating themselves, they provided leadership for local institutions to come to grips with their own records. In some cases, they created a lasting, mostly positive, impact in their own newsrooms. And they produced interesting and enlightening stories.

Not that these were easy issues to explore. Far from it. Each took a certain amount of courage.

For the *Winston-Salem Journal's* story, Crothers said he assigned his best, most seasoned reporter. "Diversity is not a word that comes to mind when describing the *Journal's* staff," wrote Frank Tursi in a front-page piece headlined, "The Inside Story: *Journal* Isn't Proud of Its Lack of Diversity."

"Of the paper's 80 journalists, four are black and one is Hispanic," the story continued.

"That gives the *Journal* a minority ratio that is the lowest among major dailies in the state."

Inside, another Tursi story read: "The *Winston-Salem Journal* has portrayed blacks unfairly by dwelling on crime stories in which blacks are killers, rapists or drug addicts, the newspaper's black critics have charged. Yes, we've been guilty of that."

A shocking story detailed one of the ugliest chapters in the paper's history: Its participation in a plot to bust a mostly black union at the city's largest employer, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, which just happened to be run by the publisher's uncle.

In 1947, after the union struck for better wages and working conditions, the *Journal's* publisher hired a former FBI agent to cover the union. Capitalizing on the hysteria of the early Cold War, he wrote that the union's leaders were members of the Communist party. He was not, of course, a journalist but a plant who succeeded in discrediting the union.

"A lot of people were surprised," Crothers said of the series' candid look at the newspaper. "Some people were angry but there were a lot of people who were moved and quite amazed that the *Journal* would do that."

The paper, itself, has come a long way since the series ran. Perhaps the most tangible result of the series is a newsroom internship the *Journal* offers to students from Winston-Salem State University, a historically black institution.

"It helped us understand the importance of minority recruiting," said Crothers. "We have a black department head now in the business department. We've got diversity in every department in the newsroom. It's a struggle for a paper this size but I think the project helped us to improve that situation and maintain a commitment to it."

THE PROJECTS

The Jackson Sun, Tennessee: Confessing a Conspiracy of Silence

The stories are dramatic, monumental — the kind news organizations exist to tell. The young man sitting stoically while hot coffee is poured on his back. Spontaneous protests that marshal hundreds of people. Mass arrests. Tainted court proceedings.

Nevertheless, these stories were very nearly lost to posterity, missing from the “rough draft” of history journalists supposedly produce.

These were suppressed stories of the 1960 civil-rights movement in Jackson, Tennessee, a Southern town where the local paper, *The Jackson Sun*, willingly led a conspiracy of silence about black residents’ struggle for social justice.

But *The Sun*, now owned by Gannett, has atoned for its huge misstep with a massive effort to tell the story at last and create a permanent record for the school children of Jackson. In October 2000 — 40 years after the original events were never recorded — *The Sun* launched a seven-part series, “The Untold Story of Jackson’s Civil Rights Movement.”

“I don’t think anyone realized when we started that our town had bus boycotts, mass arrests and really just about every kind of protest action associated with the civil-rights movement,” said David Risser, then *The Sun’s* managing editor, now managing editor at the *Montgomery Advertiser*. “Our intent was to make a lasting historical record where one didn’t exist before.”

The paper has teamed with a group of local school-teachers to write a curriculum guide using the series so this chapter of the city’s history can be taught in every Jackson area school.

It also helped create a permanent video archive of oral histories taken by students at the local community college and has endowed a student essay contest for the



© THE JACKSON SUN.

The Sun relied on the archives of other papers to reconstruct the untold story of Jackson’s civil-rights movement.

next 10 years. Reprints of the series have been distributed to schools and area libraries. It is archived at www.jacksonsun.com.

For the 40,000-circulation daily, the commitment of resources was major.

RESEARCHING PAST REPORTING

Risser said the paper assigned 20 reporters — half the editorial staff — to research and write the series. The reporters were split into teams of four or five to unearth different aspects of the early civil-rights movement.

Each team had to interview dozens of people to put together an accurate picture of what had happened. And because the events had occurred 40 years earlier, many of the participants were dead or were so old their memories were failing or — having been the whites who pulled young black men and women off lunch stools or threw eggs at them — were unwilling to talk about that era.

“We wanted to write it in serial fashion because our thinking was that it would have much more impact than a traditional journalism approach,” said Jimmy Hart, the series’ lead writer. “We thought people wouldn’t stick with the story very long if there was a lot of ‘he said, she said.’ So we tried to get three different versions of each event so we could feel comfortable saying what actually happened without bogging it down (with a lot of attribution).”

Hart, now city editor, said this meant leaving some material out if there was only one source because there was very little original documentation to back up individual recollections.



JERRY CULLEN

It took 40 years for this photo of Jackson bus boycotters to make the front page of the local paper.



THE JACKSON SUN

Jimmy Hart helped set the record straight on the town’s civil-rights movement.

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—DAVID RISSER, *THE JACKSON SUN*

A few stories existed, buried deep in old copies of *The Sun*. The day police arrested more than 140 protestors, for instance, the paper ran a story on page 12. It called the protest march a “parade” and didn’t mention the reasons for the arrests or the goals of the marchers. Not one photo appeared in *The Sun*, although some neighboring papers ran AP or UPI photos of the protests and gave the stories better play.

With those few clippings, an old yearbook from Lane College, a historically black school



HELEN COMER, THE JACKSON SUN

Four freshmen from Lane College made civil-rights history in 1960 when they led a bus boycott. Forty years later, *The Sun* reported their story for the first time.

where many of the protests originated, and a scrapbook they found in Lane’s library, the reporters were able to establish some definite dates and get leads on interviews. There were also a few old staff members who remembered the paper of that era.

Owned by the staunchly conservative Sally Pigford, *The Sun* in 1960 read more like a Chamber of Commerce newsletter. It was wedded to the business community’s belief that covering the protests would just stir up trouble.

“The thinking seemed to be that if we published all that trash about Martin Luther King Jr. and the Selma protests, the blacks in Jackson might become uppity and restive,” wrote Johnny Malone, retired senior news editor.

Many white Jackson leaders continued to defend that stance. Former *Sun* reporter John Parish, now in his 70s and once a press secretary to Gov. Lamar Alexander, claimed that downplaying and ignoring the protests allowed the community to become more integrated without violence.

“I think the proof of the pudding is that Jackson was a lot more peaceful and solved all of these problems as much as they did,” he said.

Even black leaders such as Wesley McClure, president of Lane College, didn’t fault *The Sun* for its

1960 coverage. “That was the way of life back then,” said McClure. “One wouldn’t have expected much coverage of incidents of this nature.”

Risser, however, holds the paper to a higher standard. During the time *The Sun* was burying the civil-rights struggle, John Seigenthaler, then

editor and publisher, now chairman emeritus, of *The Tennessean* in nearby Nashville, was dispatching his star reporter, David Halberstam, to cover every aspect of the movement. Halberstam produced coverage that most civil-rights leaders credit with bringing about change in the United States.

Knowing this background, Risser could not be discouraged when some readers suggested the paper, in his words, “once again ignore the story.”

“Before we even wrote it, we started getting calls denouncing us,” said Risser. “Local talk radio spent a whole morning criticizing us. People would say, ‘Why is the newspaper dredging this up?’ Some people cancelled their subscriptions. But 10 cancellations balanced against the credibility of having told the story is well worth it.”

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—DAVID RISSER, *THE JACKSON SUN*

KRON-TV: Airing Newsroom Tensions

Reporter Greg Lyon and cameraman Rick Villaroman often worked together on stories for San Francisco’s KRON-TV. Lyon, who is white, thought they had a perfectly compatible working relationship. That is, until he joined the KRON Race Committee in 1998.

Lyon was shocked to hear Villaroman, who is Hispanic, tell the group he thought the news operation was segregated by skin color.

“Apparently a lot of people were feeling if you’re a minority, a racial minority, to some degree you’re isolated here at Channel 4,” Lyon said after one session. “I had no idea that was true.”

The Race Committee was part of a difficult process that KRON put itself through in an effort to explore the full range of race relations in the Bay Area — a process made all the more remarkable because KRON shared with its viewers its staff’s internal struggle.

In a lengthy October 1999 report on its 6 p.m. newscast, KRON staff members faced the camera and described their own efforts at racial understanding. Villaroman described the defensive reaction he got when he talked about the cliques of blacks, whites and Hispanics in the news operation. Lyon admitted to taking the perceived criticism too personally, perhaps, and having to detach a bit for the dialogue even to occur.

Anchorwoman Pam Moore, who is black, gave up her comfortable seat behind the anchor desk to co-chair the Race Committee. “For all of us, it was an eye-opener,” Moore said when interviewed about the meeting for the special report. “How can we cover the diverse Bay Area when we can’t even talk about race (with each other)?”



Anchorwoman Pam Moore chaired the station’s race committee.

STUDYING YOUR NEWSROOM

The KRON Race Committee grew out of the station’s award-winning 1998 project “About Race.” That series, which kicked off with a 13-minute report during the February sweeps, looked at how race gets discussed and how it affects various aspects of life. That the project would produce some soul-searching at the station itself was perhaps inevitable.

KRON’s news director Dan Rosenheim said he decided to form the Race Committee for two reasons. The first was to encourage the station staff to learn how to discuss the subject of race comfortably, thereby improving their own understanding of the issue just as they were working to improve the public’s understanding.

The second reason was to analyze the station’s news broadcasts for signs of bias. At that

point, several studies suggested that the media tended to perpetuate inaccurate racial stereotypes. One study, for instance, found that 95 percent of “experts” quoted on network news are white. Others found African-Americans overrepresented in crime stories.

Rosenheim wanted to find out if KRON was falling into these traps. At the time, however, no tools were available to help individual stations analyze their own news content. One of the committee’s goals was to develop a kind of “score card” for itself, which it constructed with the help

of researchers at San Francisco State University.

The process was not a truly scientific analysis but KRON’s work did help the researchers develop a kit that news organizations can use to analyze their content.

The good news for the KRON committee was that the news operation was actually doing

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— CRAIG FRANKLIN, KRON PRODUCER

a pretty good job of reflecting San Francisco’s diversity in its broadcasts. There were still some areas where the committee agreed the station could improve but, by and large, the broadcast analysis proved to be less difficult than the committee members’ self-examination.

“We’ve got a pretty friendly shop overall and perhaps, because of that, people thought [race] was not really an issue we need to talk about,” said producer Craig Franklin. “People don’t have the habits or skills for talking about racial issues in general.”

CHRONICLING INSIDE DISCUSSIONS

Franklin attended the committee meetings not as a member but to cover them, with an eye toward doing a story. His presence in the role of journalist, he said, made many committee members uncomfortable.

“At the first meeting, there was a vote on whether I should even be allowed in to cover it,” added Franklin. A majority of members decided Franklin should be present but he remembered there were some votes against it.

“Nobody knew whether it was going to be a story or not,” said Franklin. “There was some fear about what they might uncover or what might happen.”

An earlier experiment in newsroom race dynamics at *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans had caused major tension between staff members. Though KRON took pains to try to avoid hard feelings, Rosenheim said he knew he couldn’t completely control the process once it started.

As it turned out, there were no major blow-ups, no embarrassing revelations about racism in the station’s newscasts. Neither, though, were there any major breakthroughs in relationships among staff members.

Franklin’s story, which aired a year and half after the committee started its work, showed committee members still struggling with the issue. Three years after the committee met, reporter Lyon said the results of its work are subtle.

“THESE ARE BABY STEPS BUT, LIKE ANYTHING ELSE, THE MORE YOU DO IT THE MORE SKILLED YOU GET.”

— CRAIG FRANKLIN, KRON PRODUCER

“I wouldn’t say there’s a much higher level of consciousness overall,” said Lyon in an interview. “There’s nothing you can point to and say ‘that’s a dramatic change.’ ”

Still, Lyon said, he believes he has been changed by participating. “I was oblivious,” he said of Villaroman’s perceptions about the newsroom. Now, he said, he can, and does, talk about the issue with Villaroman without getting defensive.

Franklin, as an observer, said he sees the committee’s biggest impact as giving reporters, if not friends, at least “allies” in other ethnic groups with whom they can consult if they are uncomfortable or confused about a race issue in a story.

“It gave them permission to talk to each other a little bit more,” said Franklin. “So a white guy doing a story about an Asian issue can talk to an Asian reporter and ask, ‘Did I get this right?’ Not that it didn’t happen before but this made it a little easier. These are baby steps but, like anything else, the more you do it the more skilled you get.

“I would love to see journalists in general become more adept at covering racial issues. A lot are, but journalists are like everybody else — we’re still not really very comfortable talking about a lot of these issues.”

Chapter Tips: *Examining Race in your Organization*

- Examine the past; it’s better to get startling revelations out in public than to pretend they don’t exist.
- Admit past mistakes; it will give you new credibility in your community.
- Expect some surprises and some work-related tension when you start to study the newsroom.
- Talk about race with your colleagues, it will help you discuss it with your audience.
- Set the goals of an internal evaluation of racial concerns: To help people talk to one another, to make allies and friends in different ethnic or racial groups and to help balance your news reporting.