

Delving into the Divide

*A Study of
Race Reporting in
Forty-Five U.S.
Newsrooms*

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Introduction

THE ISSUE OF RACE IN AMERICA defies traditional media coverage by the nature of its scope, its complexity, its intangibility. It is an area that requires novel approaches, finding ways to reach ordinary people and to relate the stories of how race affects their lives. It's been an ongoing challenge for the evolving field of civic journalism.

For decades, stories on race relations were relegated to sidebars of more spectacular racial news: civil unrest, sensational crime stories, reports from blue-ribbon panels that were frequently quoted but rarely put into practice. By the early 1990s, news organizations began to change, tackling the subject of race relations head-on. Newsrooms using civic journalism techniques were in the vanguard of this movement, equipped with additional tools to investigate this difficult and sensitive area of American life.

The Pew Center for Civic Journalism studied 45 projects on race that came to the center's attention between 1993 and 2000. The list is by no means all-inclusive but it demonstrates many of the advances that have become hallmarks of contemporary race-relations reporting.

News organizations developed series about different communities struggling to co-exist, individuals trying to understand one

another, communities experiencing success and failure, events signaling friction or understanding among whites, blacks, Latinos and a host of immigrant communities.

These projects aired on radio and television and appeared in newspapers, large and small. Some organizations used polls to assess community attitudes; some used town hall meetings or Internet chat rooms. Several projects reported on more intimate conversations in study circles and focus groups. Many invited readers to contribute directly to their pages or their Web sites. Historical context was often provided and, in a few cases, painful self-examination was part of the process. Many of the initiatives made a real difference in their communities.

These projects represent progress. Sensitive journalism that involved citizens helped many of the communities come closer together and allowed individuals to experience profound changes in outlook. Race in America is being covered with growing sophistication.

Earlier in the decade, it was revolutionary and controversial to bring people together and ask them to speak frankly about race. Later projects built on those early efforts, cutting deeper into the layers of mistrust, cynicism and paranoia that often still characterize discussions between the races.



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By March of 1999, *The Times* in Trenton, New Jersey, could begin its series on race with a statement ringing with candor:

“... While Americans affirm the importance of improving race relations, they often prove reluctant to do the heavy lifting required to make it happen ... The majority of Americans make an intellectual commitment to be ‘color-blind’ while at the same time making dozens of smaller decisions that reinforce the existence of limited meaningful contact with people of other races.”

By the year 2000, when *The New York Times* brought the weight of its considerable resources to bear on “How Race is Lived in America,” it won a Pulitzer Prize.

Newspaper editors and news directors across the country have told the Pew Center they would like to continue engaging citizens in honest explorations of race. Readers have spoken, too, telling their newspapers what has helped.

The goal of this book is to compile and analyze race coverage from the recent decade. With these examples, news organizations can build on the past in designing new, more meaningful explorations of race relations.

The book’s nine chapters explore the major techniques most recently employed in reporting on race:

- Giving it time.
- Taking a poll.
- Identifying major issues.
- Walking the streets.
- Listening to conversations.
- Debunking myths.
- Investigating the newsroom.
- Inviting community action.
- Putting it on the Web.

These categories cover a wide variety of stories and interactions journalists have generated to fit the needs of their communities. Many projects used several of the techniques and some used only one. No project used them all. Each newsroom must figure out the techniques that are best for its community. In the best-case scenarios, newsrooms will develop new tools that will move reporting on race relations into unexplored territory. Please stay in touch with the Pew Center as your newsroom develops new initiatives to cover race so we can share ideas with other journalists seeking to deal with this critical national issue.

The Pew Center is dedicated to the belief that journalism can make a difference. Race is one area where America is still struggling to make a great deal of progress.

— **Jan Schaffer, Executive Director**
Pew Center for Civic Journalism

Contents

INTRODUCTION	2	
CHAPTER 1	Give it Time: A path to conflicting perceptions	7
	<i>The New York Times: Giving Reporters Time</i>	11
	<i>The Press Enterprise, Riverside, CA: Giving the Story Time</i>	14
	<i>The Spokesman-Review, Spokane, WA: Breaking the News</i>	17
	Chapter Tips	19
CHAPTER 2	Take a Poll: A doorway to the issues	20
	<i>St. Paul Pioneer Press: Casting a Multilingual Net</i>	24
	<i>Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Finding the Facts</i>	26
	<i>Akron Beacon Journal, The Charlotte Observer:</i> Tracking Long-term Changes	29
	Chapter Tips	31
CHAPTER 3	Identify the Issues: A measure of racial disparities	32
	<i>The Columbus Dispatch: Exposing Health-Care Barriers</i>	38
	<i>The Charlotte Observer: Riling NASCAR Fans</i>	41
	<i>The Sacramento Bee: Moving beyond Conflict</i>	43
	<i>The Times-Picayune, New Orleans: Unearthing Environmental Injustice</i> ...	46
	Chapter Tips	48
CHAPTER 4	Walk the Streets: A hunt for hidden community layers	49
	<i>San Francisco Examiner: Touring your own City</i>	52
	<i>Lexington Herald-Leader: Unmasking a Segregated City</i>	55
	Chapter Tips	57

CHAPTER 5	Listen to People Talk: A window on different views	58
	<i>The Charlotte Observer:</i> Creating Community Conversations	62
	Minnesota Public Radio, KMOJ-FM, Minneapolis: Connecting via Videoconferencing	64
	Chapter Tips	69
CHAPTER 6	Debunk the Myths: A challenge to preconceived notions	71
	KRON-TV, San Francisco: Underscoring Genetic Similarities	74
	WHRO-TV, WVBT-TV, Norfolk, VA: Tracing the Slave Route	76
	Chapter Tips	78
CHAPTER 7	Tell your own Story: A cornerstone to credibility	79
	<i>The Jackson Sun:</i> Confessing a Conspiracy of Silence	82
	KRON-TV, San Francisco: Airing Newsroom Tensions	85
	Chapter Tips	87
CHAPTER 8	Invite Action: A tool for community buy-in	88
	<i>Akron Beacon Journal:</i> Launching Long-term Initiatives	92
	<i>Marshall News Messenger,</i> TX: Instilling Quiet Progress	95
	<i>Times Record News,</i> Wichita Falls, TX: Generating Tepid Response	98
	Chapter Tips	100
CHAPTER 9	Put it on the Web: An avenue to access and interactivity	101
	<i>The New York Times:</i> Setting the Gold Standard	104
	Chapter Tips	107

“WE HAVE TORN DOWN THE BARRIERS IN OUR LAWS.
NOW WE MUST BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS IN
OUR LIVES,
OUR MINDS AND
OUR HEARTS.”

— *PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON,*

JUNE 1997, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA-SAN DIEGO