

“ABOUT RACE” SERIES
Craig Franklin, Karyne Holmes,
KRON-TV

Analysis

The *About Race* series produced by KRON-TV in San Francisco stands as one of local television’s shining moments in the reporting about race and ethnicity. The stories challenged stereotypes and racial myths, replacing them with contemporary, easy-to-digest science and thought-provoking interviews. The process behind the series, involving lots of collaboration, self-examination, and a determination to push beyond the usual approach to storytelling on race and ethnicity, guides journalists who aspire to excellence in this arena.



Two of the *About Race* stories featured in *The Authentic Voice*, “What Is Race?” and “News and Race,” demonstrate the strength of the project. “What Is Race?” takes on a simple but powerful notion—that racial differences are grounded in biology—and pushes viewers to see how relatively insignificant race is in genetics. The story brings in a strong expert and adds the voices of people who grapple with the belief that race is biologically based, science notwithstanding (**Text: p. 30**). The story structure dismantles longstanding arguments about genetic racial differences but respects the difficulty viewers might have with the story’s conclusions (**DVD: KRON-TV Team interview, 1:16**).

The second piece, “News and Race,” uses the KRON newsroom as a case study, underscoring how easy it is for disparate views of race and ethnic relations to coexist, even among people who work closely together. As in “What Is Race?” the story uses strong voices—particularly those of two veterans, cameraman Rick Villaroman and reporter Greg Lyon—to show the tension, uncertainty, and confusion that lie at the center of racial and ethnic misunderstandings.



**KRON-TV Newscaster
Pam Moore**

The story and DVD interview also demonstrate how critical time and respect are when asking people to be candid about matters of race and ethnicity (**DVD: KRON-TV Team interview, 10:31**). What makes this story potent is that it doesn’t offer a pat conclusion or artificial solutions. Often, the strongest stories about race and ethnicity do nothing more than lay bare the complexity of the matter.

That complexity in both stories is best summed up in a phrase that should guide much of the work done in this arena: There’s probably more to it than that. The “What Is Race?” story essentially uses the pairing of black and white friends to show that while race matters, it might not matter much. In “News and Race,” the

diversity team’s content audit paints the station in a fairly positive light, even as the conversations among journalists at the station reveal a racial and ethnic schism within the staff. The point? There was more to it than some thought.

In The Classroom



Producer Craig Franklin, KRON-TV

Two issues raised in the DVD interview underscore the complexity of the KRON stories and are likely to invite discussion. Producer Craig Franklin and anchor/reporter Pete Wilson challenge the idea that balance is achieved simply by offering an opposite or contrary point of view. It’s an issue raised by another KRON story: “The Rape of Nanking” (DVD: Yeh interview, 10:00).

When engaging on this point, it’s easy for the conversation to become polarized and unproductive. Steer clear of this by getting students to talk about the difference between balance and fairness, between factual and contextual accuracy. They may not agree in the end, but that kind of discussion pushes students to employ critical thinking skills.

Getting People To Be Candid

Plunging beneath platitudes and other less-than-genuine views of race or ethnicity is never easy. Veteran journalists say a credible reputation sometimes can open doors (DVD: Yeh interview, 5:09; Koppel/Wray interview, 3:47), but the strength of a story often rests on the power of the interview.

Here are four tips for getting to the more interesting insights in stories about race and ethnicity:

Know what’s at stake: Sources (and journalists) often come to the story with great fear that they’ll be misunderstood, judged harshly or unfairly, or found to harbor biases they’d rather keep under wraps. Be mindful of this.

Have patience: People rarely say what they really mean the first time they speak about race and ethnicity. Wait. Listen attentively. Don’t fill every silence with another question. Remember that, at their core, most people want to talk about this (DVD: Hull interview, 5:19).

Put people at ease: When possible, acknowledge the discomfort that the issues surrounding race and ethnicity engender for most everyone. You can help put them at ease by using open-ended, nonjudgmental, clarifying questions.

Listen and follow up: One of the most powerful questions in interviewing is also one of the simplest: “What do you mean?” It invariably leads to deeper insights and signals to

sources that you're giving them every opportunity to be understood (**DVD: KRON-TV Team interview, 7:04**).

Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Getting People to be Candid, the interview with the KRON-TV team has entries listed in the Topic Index in the following categories:

Building Trust / Establishing Credibility; Ethics: Dealing With Stereotypes
Ethics: Portraying People Fairly
Ethics: What Is Balance?
Framing the Story

Doing Your Homework
Getting People to Be Candid
Lessons from the Field
Pressing Sources
Who Should Review Your Stories?

Assignments

1. A number of news organizations through the years have explored the question begged in the lead story of the *About Race* series, "What Is Race?" Find four or five such stories. Compare and contrast the approaches taken and conclusions journalists have drawn. What have you learned from the exercise?



Cameraman Rick Villaroman, KRON-TV

2. Interview five people about race, focusing on the notion introduced by Dr. Sylvia Spangler in the "What Is Race?" story, that race is "something we do to each other." Include people whose race or ethnicity is different from yours. Write a 500-word piece for print and online publications or produce a two-minute broadcast based on the interviews. Separately, write a brief essay describing which questions you thought elicited the greatest candor.

3. Talk to journalism leaders in your community about how they think the race or ethnicity of all journalists affects the way they view sources, facts, or a story's frame. Write an essay about how news organizations should exploit or guard against such effects.