

Analysis

In the ABC News *Nightline* story “Asian-American,” correspondent John Donovan and producer Mary Claude Foster present viewers with a full range of voices, context, and case studies to illustrate the palpable fear among many Asian Americans that the United States was about to repeat history with another “yellow scare.”

That perception alone would have been a story, given the alarm many people of Asian descent expressed as the Wen Ho Lee spy investigation unfolded. But context informs perception. So viewers who did not have the perspective of many Asian Americans needed the history—everything from archival movie clips to the references Donovan makes to racist laws and practices—if they were to understand the angst at the root of the story.



Correspondent John Donovan reports on the ABC News Nightline story *Asian- American*. (Photo: ABC News Nightline)

Donvan points out that he almost passed on the story. Had he kept to a narrow mission of proving or disproving the existence of what he called a “racist backlash” to the spy controversy, he would have missed the larger story (**Text: p. 176; DVD: Donvan interview, 2:32**). The larger story—the fear of a modern-day “yellow scare” that Donvan originally thought was paranoia—did have a basis in fact. Examples like those of Hoyt Zia and Suzanne Ahn, each stopping just short of proving outright bigotry, show that the problem was about more than just perception.



Angela Oh discusses how Asian-Americans are made to feel like foreigners. (Photo: ABC News Nightline)

The story and interview provide a strong argument for what Donvan calls “reporting into your blind spots” (**Text: p. 179; DVD: Donvan interview, 3:38**). In those blind spots, as this piece proves, some of the untold stories of race and ethnic relations reside.

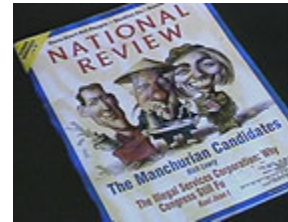
There are moments in “Asian-American” that underscore how careful and purposeful journalists need to be when grouping people by race and ethnicity. In the story, Donvan says the reasons Asian Americans feel vulnerable are not obvious “to a white American” (**DVD Asian-American story, 3:41**). By referencing only white people, the story leaves out all the other racial and ethnic groups that might also be guilty of—or ignorant about—the prejudice at the story’s core (**DVD: Donvan interview, 8:28**).

In another instance, Donovan says that the Chinese government continues “to target Asian Americans” to spy on the United States. Here, he inadvertently implies that the Chinese government was recruiting members of other Asian groups as spies (**DVD: Asian-American story, 16:35 ; DVD: Donovan interview, 6:00**). Precision in referring to racial and ethnic groups is essential to excellent reporting.

In the Classroom

Donvan strongly defends his belief that he, like all journalists, brings more than just an objective eye to a story (**DVD: Donovan interview, 3:23**). This fairly direct affront to a long-held journalistic idea can lead to a vigorous debate about impartiality.

It also provides an opportunity for students to discuss the assumptions they make about racial and ethnic groups different from their own. That can be a delicate conversation. When people talk about other racial and ethnic groups, they sometimes reveal ignorance, biases, and stereotypes.



The National Review magazine cover on the Chinese spy allegations. (Photo: ABC News Nightline)

Prepare students for such a conversation by giving voice at the outset to the dangers of generalizing and to the reality that unintentional offense is a frequent by-product of candid discussions. Use the tools of talking across difference to keep the conversation going through the rough spots.

Covering People Different From You

It may be that the most important thing to remember about covering people who are racially or ethnically different from you is not what’s different but what’s the same. Bring the same tools to these stories as to all stories: front-end preparation, knowledge of the subject matter, respect for sources, sharp storytelling skills.

Recognize also that difference matters. The less you know about a group and its history, the greater the chance you’ll miss or miscast stories, use language in a way that’s imprecise or harmful, play to stereotypes, or commit a cultural faux pas while reporting.

Humility, then, is a good starting point when covering people different from you (**DVD: Donovan interview, 3:25; Text: p. 179**). Journalists should seek not just to understand what they don’t know about others but to work constantly to know more. It’s also critical that journalists check out the assumptions they bring to a story and develop techniques for fact-checking their work (**DVD: Shah interview, 2:24 ; Hull interview, 14:49**).

Find guidelines for reporting and writing across difference, including style suggestions from such journalist associations as the AAJA, NAJA, NABJ, SAJA, and NAHJ.

Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Covering People Different from You, the interview with John Donovan has entries listed in the Topic Index in the following categories:

Casting the Story

Complexity

Context

Ethics: Dealing with Stereotypes

Ethics: Using Disturbing Images and Words

Ethics: What is Balance?

Framing the Story

Language Choices

Lessons from the Field

Assignments

1. Research the “yellow scare” John Donovan mentions in his essay (**Text: p. 175**). What events in U.S. history involving other racial and ethnic groups can you identify that parallel what Asian Americans experienced during that period? Find an example, preferably in the local media, where one of those events was referenced in a recent news story.

2. Interview people in your community about *Nightline*'s claim that many Asian Americans fear they are not quite seen as Americans (**DVD: Donovan story, 1:04**). Do a story exploring the extent to which that bias exists in your area.

3. In the interview, Donovan refers to the “unbelievably hurtful remark” of a radio DJ (**DVD: Donovan interview, 11:36; Asian-Americans story, 5:08**). *Nightline* quoted the DJ in the story. Assume the role of the executive producer. If you had the tape, would you have aired it? Write an essay explaining your answer.



Chi Ming Hu discusses being fired for "security reasons." (ABC News Nightline)