

Analysis

In *Diverse and Divided* and *A Tale of Two Cultures*, reporter Elizabeth Llorente provides a template for writing stories about changing communities. She taps into what she calls the “phantom dialogue” of race and ethnic relations to reveal the harsh, poignant, and often contradictory truths at work in two New Jersey towns.

Her descriptive account of group clashes and individual frustrations in *Diverse and Divided* brings the reader to a deeper understanding of the complexity of relationships in a small city. The story counters the myth of “minorities” as a monolith by showing a range of differences among and between black and Latino residents of Paterson, N.J.

Their views are blunt and layered, and, as is the case in both series, Llorente gives voice to the opinions in unblinking quotes (**DVD: Llorente interview, 1:06**).

But the stories go well beyond the typical, oversimplified debate of victims and villains to show how all sides are able to find flaws in their home community and empathize with other groups.

Note the way Llorente uses strategic listening posts to gain access to tough, sometimes distressing conversations going on in a community: the Hispanic Multi-purpose Youth Drop-in Center from “One City, Two Communities” and the library in “Palisades Park Grapples with Change,” for example (**Text: pp. 270, 281**). In those places and others—bodegas, restaurants, offices, and porches—readers hear the anger, despair, struggle, and optimism that drive both series.

The candor and insights that emerge, Llorente says, are the fruit of research and relationships developed by spending weeks, not hours, reporting in the neighborhoods. She read books and newspaper clippings and even rented a Spike Lee movie after several sources likened the problems in Paterson to those portrayed in Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (**Text: pp. 288–289, 291**).



City Councilwoman Vera Ames-Garnes of the 4th Ward sits on her stoop which she calls "my office." (Photo credit: Danielle P. Richards/The Record)



Elsa Mantilla, left, with customer Ana Rodriguez in her shop in Paterson, N.J. Both women are from the Dominican Republic. (Photo credit: Danielle P. Richards/The Record)

For context, Llorente provides historical information about demographic shifts in Paterson and Palisades Park and uses Census data to ground the pieces in the larger trends of immigration and cultural conflict unfolding across the country (**Text: pp. 257, 275–276**). That context was important. Without it, the Koreans, Latinos, and black and white people would seem unique in their struggles with prejudice and change.

Race, ethnicity, and nationality intermingle in both series, and Llorente does not always draw important lines among them. In *Diverse and Divided*, she refers to rifts between “blacks” and “Hispanics” without addressing the complicating fact that many of the Latino immigrants are black. In *A Tale of Two Cultures*, she uses such words as “white,” “long-time residents,” and “Americans” interchangeably in a way that makes the terms seem synonymous. That effectively excludes other racial and ethnic groups, including Koreans and Guatemalans, from being considered American in the stories.

In the Classroom

Reporting and writing students at the Missouri School of Journalism get points added to their broadcast package scores for including people from off campus in their news stories. A Kennesaw State University professor gives her students extra points for going “outside of their comfort zone.” Students often find it difficult to interview strangers, especially strangers who are different from them in some significant way.



Signs greet visitors to Palisades Park, N.J. (Photo: ABC News, Nightline)

Professors can use *Diverse and Divided* and *A Tale of Two Cultures* to help students talk about the benefits of getting a wide variety of perspectives for each story. It’s a good chance to talk about how students can handle some of the incendiary things people will say about one another once the journalist succeeds in getting to candor.

Complexity

There are always more than two sides to any story, and there are usually more people in the middle on a controversial issue than there are at either extreme. Pursuing that complexity is a part of excellent journalism. When journalists can see past the polarized sides of an issue, they gain access to more nuance, more truth, and, often, a more interesting story.

We frequently frame stories about race and ethnic relations in the false dichotomy of saints and sinners, with little acknowledgment that there’s probably a bit of both in everyone. Such stories don’t always ring true in the public ear, a point reporter Elizabeth Llorente makes about her two series, *Diverse and Divided* and *A Tale of Two Cultures* (**DVD: Llorente interview, 5:18**).



Elizabeth Llorente
The Record

To get at the complexity embedded in most stories about race and ethnicity, journalists should remember a few key ideas:

There’s more to it than that—Begin your reporting with the expectation that each interviewee or group has more than one perspective on the issue. Be counterintuitive, listening for the things you don’t expect to hear from individuals or groups. That’s how reporter Allie Shah says she found one of the factual gems in “**Tug of War**” (**Text: p. 20; DVD: Shah interview, 2:24**).

Prejudice is universal—Reporter Anne Hull shows it in “Old South Goes with the Wind” (**Text: pp. 217, 228**). Correspondent John Donovan discovered it in telling the story “Asian American” (**DVD: Donovan interview, 12:18**). Report thoroughly so that you can put prejudice in its proper context and you’re better able to show all sides of your sources.

Contradictions can coexist—When there are competing pictures of a person—the saint and sinner, for example—one need not cancel the other out. Journalists should include both in the story, trusting that the more complete, more genuine picture will resonate with readers, listeners, and viewers.

Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Complexity, the interview with Elizabeth Llorente has entries in the Topic Index in the following categories:

Capturing the Authentic Voice
Covering People Different from You
Describing People by Race and Ethnicity
Ethics: Dealing with Stereotypes
Ethics: Handling Quotes
Ethics: Showing Negative Sides of People

Framing the Story
Language Choices
Reporting through Observation
Who Is the Audience?
Writing with Authority

Assignments

1. Research changes in demographic patterns in your community over the past fifty years. Bring in five examples of how news media covered those changes.
2. Using Census data, find a nearby community that is experiencing a demographic shift along racial or ethnic lines. Do a story that captures the perceptions people in the community hold about those who are ethnically different from them.
3. Llorente says in her essay that the range of perceptions at play in both series “needed to be balanced against the reality” that her reporting uncovered (**Text: p.286**). Write an essay outlining instances where she accomplishes this. Discuss how you think Llorente’s approach enhanced the stories. Is there a down side?