

## Analysis

Beneath the disparate opinions surrounding the accidental death of a Buffalo, N.Y., teenager were some important truths. By weaving both hard fact and public opinion into the story “The Color Line and the Bus Line,” the ABC News *Nightline* crew provided a roadmap to reporting in the multidimensional arena of race and ethnicity. Though the traffic accident that killed Cynthia Wiggins occurred in 1995, the issues at the core of this story are as relevant today as they were then.

Among the lessons offered by this story is this: journalists are limited by the breadth of their personal awareness of racial matters. Push beyond those limitations, and stories can become more nuanced, more interesting, and, most important, more complete.

Veteran correspondent Ted Koppel begins with an acknowledgment in his studio introduction that he originally didn’t buy the notion that the story of Wiggins’s death had a racial angle (**DVD: The Color Line and the Bus Line, 1:01**). Had Koppel or producer Eric Wray stopped there, the fuller story, which proves the role race and class played in Wiggins’s life and death, would not have reached a national audience.



Ted Koppel and Eric Wray, *Nightline*

It’s clear that that’s a critical place to begin understanding this piece once viewers get to the revelation that race and class, practically inextricable in East Buffalo at the time, motivated key players in the story. Add those facts to the historic context of racial exclusion in the community and the omnipresent suspicion among black Americans that racism is afoot—insights Wray pressed Koppel to consider—and the Wiggins story takes form (**Text: pp.119–120, 122; DVD: Koppel/Wray interview, 00:44**).

Koppel demonstrates a key skill of reporting and writing about race and ethnicity when he essentially decodes language (**DVD: The Color Line and the Bus Line story, 8:59; Koppel/Wray interview, 6:55**). Obfuscation, euphemism, and benign clumsiness with words—often driven by wariness, discomfort, or inexperience—all can converge in stories about race and ethnicity. The journalist’s task is to use skillful interviewing to get to clarity and precision.



**Cynthia Wiggins,**  
victim of the Buffalo  
mall accident.  
(Photo: ABC News,  
Nightline)

For public reaction to the Wiggins controversy, the *Nightline* team chose a number of sources to use in the story. Included in the twenty-one on-camera interviews were a radio talk-show host, a journalist, a friend of Wiggins's, her father, a teacher, a professor, a shopper, two people in a nightclub, and officials from the mall, the police department, and the transit authority.

In most cases, the *Nightline* producers called ahead and made appointments with the subjects to do their interviews. This allowed for a quiet, more relaxed setting conducive to being thoughtful about this volatile case. But *Nightline* didn't do this in all instances.

While interviews with the six black people and twelve of the fifteen white people took place in formal setting, three white interviewees were approached in a public place and asked for spontaneous comments. Two of those interviews took place at a nightclub and one at the mall, environments that would make it hard to do much thinking on the spot (**DVD: Koppel/Wray interview, 7:46**). In stories on race and ethnicity where any hint of imbalance can damage the story's credibility, journalists should see to it that all sources get the best shot at giving thoughtful answers.

## In the Classroom



**The chained fence marks a boarded up factory in Buffalo. (ABC, Nightline)**

At the center of this chapter is the notion, represented in several ways, that the race of the journalist is a factor in everything from news judgment to interviewing sources. Students may want to talk about the *Nightline* team's decision to match, when possible, the race of producers/crew with that of the interview subject (**Text: pp. 120–122, DVD: Koppel/Wray interview, 3:49**).

Strive to keep the conversation from lapsing into absolutism. Explore with students the benefits and drawbacks of assuming the existence of what Anne Hull calls the “slight camaraderie” that exists between people of the same race/ethnicity (**DVD: Hull interview, 5:58**). Discuss with them Wray's articulation of the difference between what motivates or discourages people when the topic is race (**DVD: Koppel/Wray interview, 5:05**). What can students learn from the benefits of a same-race interview that they can apply when they interview someone across racial/ethnic lines? (**See also DVD: Topic Index, Covering People Like You.**)

## Building Trust, Establishing Credibility

Amid all the conversations about how hard it is to talk about race and ethnicity, journalists should not lose sight of one truth: people do want to talk. But many need to trust the journalist first. Whether working on a weeks-long project or a deadline story, it's the small things journalists do that build a trusting relationship:



Ted Koppel at the site of the fatal traffic accident.

Go where the people are—Get out of the office and off the telephone. Show people by the places you've been and the people you've interviewed that you've done your homework and are worthy of their trust (**Text: pp. 288–289**).

Be respectful—Approach people in a formal manner, using Mr., Mrs., Ms., sir, and ma'am, for instance, unless they give you a signal to be more informal. In general, take your cue from the source.

Explain the story—Tell people what you know. Show, through initial conversations, that you grasp the breadth and importance of the story you're telling and that you need them to make the story more complete (**DVD: AP Team interview, 7:03**).

Show interest in the source—As with all stories, remember that the source has a life beyond your interview. Bring a natural curiosity with you and show sources, as Todd Lewan of the Associated Press says, that you know they're more than “lab mice” (**Text: p. 289; DVD: AP Team interview, 6:52**).

Your reputation counts—The care you take in every story can help you when approaching people about a sensitive topic (**Text: p. 156; DVD: Koppel/Wray interview, 4:35; Yeh interview, 5:09**). Sometimes it even helps to bring along samples of your work to show sources what kinds of stories you've done and how you've handled matters of race and ethnicity—or any sensitive subject (**Text: pp. 19, 94**).

## Also in the DVD Topic Index

Besides Building Trust, the interview with Ted Koppel and Eric Wray has entries listed in the following Topic Index categories:

### Covering People Different From You

**Ethics: Various issues**

**Getting People to be Candid**

**Language Choices**

### Lessons from the Field

**Pressing Sources**

**Who Is the Audience?**

## Assignments

1. Read the introduction to Studs Terkel’s 1992 book *Race*. In small groups, discuss the racial schism he identifies and the ways it manifests itself—or doesn’t—in your lives or those of people you know. Prepare a brief presentation for the class outlining the key points of the introduction and how they do or do not relate to your life and community.



Cheektowaga Police  
(ABC News Nightline)

2. Choose a current racial/ethnic issue in your community and gather reactions to it. Approach three people in a public place and do an interview with each, asking for their comments on the spot. Also set up individual sit-down interviews with three other people, planning the time and location of the interviews ahead of time. Write an essay comparing and contrasting the answers the interview subjects gave in the two settings and discuss your comfort level in conducting each of the interviews.

3. Former *Nightline* executive producer Tom Bettag says in his essay (**Text: p. 127**) that the *Nightline* team, in developing the *America in Black and White* series, kept asking, “What is it that white people don’t get?” Ted Koppel said about the Cynthia Wiggins story that *Nightline* needed to convince white viewers that there was a story worth telling (**DVD: Koppel/Wray interview, 9:41**).

4. What do you think of *Nightline*’s decision to reach out to white people in this series? Place yourself in the role of an executive producer and write a thousand-word position paper supporting or rejecting *Nightline*’s approach.