



Bringing diversity to the newsroom is not the same as bringing diversity to the coverage

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Journalism professor Neil Reisner writes about how he teaches students to cover minority or ethnic communities in a way that's not all food, fun, festivals or crime and doesn't sound like a National Geographic special.

By Neil Reisner

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Full disclosure: I'm a middle-aged, middle class, white, Jewish guy who looks like a hippie and who grew up in monochromatic Pacific Palisades, Calif., still better than 90 percent white even today. And I'm writing about diversity.

Not diversity in the newsroom, though. Let's stipulate that newsrooms should resemble the communities they serve and that after at least three decades of effort, according to surveys by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, they don't.

So, maybe it's time to change the subject. Maybe it's time to acknowledge that "one from Column A and two from column B" efforts to make newsrooms diverse are really just tokenism in drag and won't inherently change how we cover minority or ethnic communities. Maybe it's time to put as much effort into the latter as we do the former.

Florida International University, where I teach, is an extraordinarily diverse school. Nearly two-thirds of the student body is of Hispanic origin, a catch-all term that includes Cubans, Dominicans, Nicaraguans, Argentineans and virtually every other Latin culture; about 17 percent are white; about 13 percent black, another catch-all that can mean African American, Haitian, Jamaican and any number of other origins; and the balance the proverbial "other."

FIU's School of Journalism and Mass Communication is similarly diverse and therefore attracts great interest from print and broadcast recruiters interested in upping their newsrooms' color content.

They come with their stereotypes intact. They seem to figure that all students whose last names are Rodriguez speak Spanish, even though many third-generation Hispanics don't, just as many third-generation Japanese or Germans don't speak their ancestral tongues. Worse, they seem to figure that they can hire a student who immigrated from Cuba 10 years ago and send her to cover migrant farm workers from Mexico, apparently believing that all those Spanish-speakers are the same. (One benighted recruiter proudly bragged to a class full of Spanish-surnamed students with nary a Mexican among them that his company had recently started covering Cinco de Mayo.)

By contrast, for the last 10 years, I've taught a course required for all journalism students entitled "Reporting In a Multi-Ethnic Community." I often describe it -- sometimes even out loud -- as a course in "How to be a middle-aged, middle class, white, Jewish guy, who looks like a hippie, gets assigned to cover Harlem or Little Havana or Little Saigon and does it in a way that's not all food, fun, festivals or crime and doesn't sound like a National Geographic special."

What's most interesting, though, is how it disproves the notion that simply because a reporter is black or brown or yellow (or Jewish or Hungarian or Saudi) he or she can cover people who are superficially similar better than reporters who aren't.

Of course, the oft-repeated conventional wisdom is that you don't have to be one to cover one. That said, one of my best-ever errors was when I covered the installation of a Roman Catholic bishop, a subject I didn't learn a whole lot about in Hebrew School. Likewise, a talented African-American reporter of my acquaintance made a similar mistake when he covered a holiday observance at my synagogue.

The cause in both cases: We didn't know what to ask.

In my course, we start by talking about stereotypes and prejudice -- the ones we all learn at the dinner table, from our grandparents, our friends and the culture around us. We work through exercises that show how we cannot avoid our learned-from-birth stereotypes even when we know we're supposed to.

We talk openly about subjects rarely discussed in public, much less in politically correct classrooms. An Anglo student relates how he crosses the street when he sees a black man approaching.

African-Americans and Haitians examine why their communities don't get along, how people from the islands sometimes see African Americans as lazy and unambitious and how African-Americans resent what they see as islanders' superiority complexes. A conversation about Asian communities spurs a second-generation Chinese woman to blurt out, "I'm really bad in math, dammit." No topic is off limits.

We look at the ways media cover ethnicity by covering festivals; how young black males in the newspaper are usually suspects or defendants; and Muslims are either terrorists or community leaders proclaiming not all Muslims are terrorists. We talk about ethnic politics and ethnic media; we tell ethnic jokes and we discuss the "N" word, often – gasp – saying it out loud.

We learn how to acknowledge our biases, set them aside and how to see the world through the eyes of people who don't look, speak, think, eat, behave or believe as we do.

And then we go out into the world.

Students each compile lists of three places so completely out of their comfort zones that they fear even thinking about going to any of them. And then they each go to one.

Anglo students from the suburbs go to African-American barber shops. A Hispanic woman who believes with all her heart that Jews are rich and control everything goes to a lunch program for poor Jewish seniors. An African-American man whose discomfort around gay men is so great that he shudders at their mere mention goes to a gay neighborhood and makes a new friend. (Wow, he marveled, gay men are interested in sports!) Cuban students go to shops catering to the Santeria religion – the Cuban version of Voodoo – some so fearful they douse themselves with holy water before and after. The African-American child whose parents are doctors and who went to prep school heads to the 'hood."

They go at least three times, not to write stories but just to hang out. They learn how to talk to people who live in different worlds, how to develop the guides and sources who can act as cultural translators. They learn to ask the kinds of questions they're afraid to ask for fear of looking stupid or offending, questions along the lines of, "Why do you do [fill in the blank]?" They learn how to report from the ground up, finding sources among the people who live in a community rather than the people who claim to lead it, whether they do or not.

They write blogs about what they see and hear, sometimes including photos or video. We talk in class. And a fair number of students say the experiences change their lives.

After 10 years of teaching and sending hundreds of students into the world, I'm convinced the experiences also change their careers. I hear back from them when they're assigned to cover communities they've never known and they tell me how comfortable they are and how they're able to ask probing questions and earn the respect of the people they cover.

We can bring diversity to the newsroom by hiring one from Column A and two from Column B until we meet some demographic criteria.

Bringing diversity to coverage is a different matter and we won't do that until we teach all journalists how.

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