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Nomination for Excellence in Teaching Award essay

When news consumers pick up an article or tune into to a newscast, some may wonder how or why the sources for the stories are selected. It is a valid question. Readers, listeners and viewers too often don't see themselves (read ethnic group, socio-economic class) in the quotes and sound bites of the day.

Too often the media's news sources – from technical experts to the “man on the street” interviews – dwell in what I call a reporter's “comfort zone”. They look like, dress like pray like and live the reporter who is asking the questions. The news becomes a regurgitation of facts, impressions and opinions of the reporter's communal support group. Despite many advances in diversity, news coverage can be sterile and predictable, representing an inaccurate portrayal of the community. Instead of reporting what's new, we often end up telling people what's old, and we rely on the same sources to substantiate the oldness. People stop reading, watching, listening. Understandably.

The media often do not stretch beyond their awkward and deliberate attempts to appear diverse. We see those efforts in prime time news specials or sometimes in published, in-depth takeouts about diversity issues. We see it when a news panel or group of sources falls into stereotypical ethnic trilogy: a white man, a black man and a white woman. It's the media's way of saying we're not driving our father's Oldsmobile, that the gatekeepers of news are no longer just white males. We've come to expect the ethnic source trilogy as a given, but what about black women, Asian men and women, Hispanic men and women? The list could go on, but it doesn't in our news pages, in our televised news programs.

We tend to quote African-American physicians on hypertension but not on cancer research, Asian-American scientists on computer technology but not on pop music, Native Americans on the Miami Circle, but not on economic market trends. We don't do the homework to diversify our sources; we don't step out of the stereotype and comfort zones.

To address that issue and to help our students understand the importance of writing for and about the community, not just a segment of it, I came up with an assignment a few years ago that I have all of my reporting classes do.

Students are required to interview people who may not be in their comfort zone. I first ask them that if they were given an assignment to do a story on how some people are cooling off on a hot day, would they approach a person in a wheelchair. Would they talk to a German-speaking couple? Would they talk to the guy who is picking up garbage off the beach? The answers are blank stares. So I shake them up a bit with the following assignment.

The source classifications may vary from year to year, and the reporting topics for the assignment will change, but I generally give them 10 sources from the following list:

Assignment 1: Step out of your comfort zone – diversify your sources

1. Someone who is older than 80
2. A preschooler
3. A high school student
4. An academic scholar

5. A blue-collar worker
6. Someone who is unemployed
7. Someone whose first language is not English
8. Someone who is not a member of your religion
9. Someone who is gay
10. Someone who is physically handicapped
11. A recent retiree
12. A current member of the military
13. Someone of a different ethnic group
14. Someone who has suffered a debilitating illness
15. Someone who is tired
16. A student athlete who is not on the football, basketball or baseball team
17. Someone who is too busy to talk to you
18. A freshman commuter student
19. The most attractive person you see today
20. Someone who sells flowers on the road
21. A person who lives in the inner city
22. A Muslim student
23. Someone who has fought in a war
24. A stay-at-home mom
25. A devout Republican/Democrat/Independent

Students think I am crazy when they see the assignment. I give them about two weeks to complete it, and I get and give feedback during the intervening class sessions. The exercise gives me a chance to tell them about reporting styles – how to interview a child; what to do when a person speaks in broken English. It also helps them focus on basic reporting and note-taking skills. I give them feedback in the notes they turn in. Did you get age, occupation (if pertinent), where the source lives? Did you ask follow-up questions?

Some of the things they have come back with make me cringe or laugh. One student went to Dadeland Mall with a checklist of sources he needed to interview. He parked himself near Burger King and flagged shoppers: “Are you gay, homeless or unemployed?” I don’t know why security didn’t remove him.

This from a frustrated student who interviewed a preschooler: “The 3-year-old kid I interviewed told me she had to go to the bathroom after I asked the first question.

This initial assignment makes it easier for students throughout the rest of the semester (and I hope when they continue reporting for other classes and in their newsrooms) to include diverse sources in their stories. Sometimes they go too far. A quote from a story once had this attribution: “.....,” said XXX XXX, an Asian commuter student who is handicapped and wears glasses.

I’m hoping with this exercise to give students a chance to learn how to communicate and to learn from the communication. When I was an editor at The Miami Herald, one of my reporters had to do interview a grieving mother who lived in public housing in Coconut Grove. It was, the reporter told me, the first time she had ever seen a roach. She left the interview without the information she needed. She was just that uncomfortable. I sent her back.

I want our students to be able to get the story, whether it is at the White House, your house or my house. Our classes should give them a chance to sample the diversity that makes up Miami, our country and world; make them appreciate the opportunity to sit down in it, walk through it, even not to like it.

Later, as students get assignments through our news service for The Miami Herald or other publications, they find themselves interviewing some of the source categories of this assignment.

Jessica DuFresne's, a print graduate student in our 2004-05 class, was assigned to do a feature story on a World War II soldier for Veteran's Day. It was a complicated story and Jessica was a bit intimidated about talking to an elderly veteran. Then she remembered that with the diversity assignment she had interviewed a member of the military as well as an elderly person. "I can do this," she said.

The Herald thought so too. Jessica's article appeared Nov. 11, 2004, as the display story on Page 1A.