

## 8 Word Stories

### The Idea

This assignment is based on Michele Norris's (NPR) Race Card Project. The Race Card project asks people to tell their stories related to race in one sentence using only six words. During the fall 2016 semester undergraduate students in a broadcast news class partnered with a local news organization to produce eight word stories (the number was changed from six to eight because the news organization is Channel 8). Students chose different locations in the community and asked people to express their thoughts about the upcoming presidential election using only one sentence with eight words. Community members wrote their sentences on white boards and the students video recorded the community members as they spoke about why they wrote what they did. Some of the stories were featured on-air at Channel 8, while others were featured in the politics section of the station's website.

### Project Goals

The goals of this project included:

- Engaging students in community storytelling
- Honing multimedia news gathering skills
- Approaching election coverage in a different way
- Exposing students to professional newsroom standards and expectations
- Interviewing members of the community (as opposed to people on campus) to force students out of their comfort zones

### How Did it Work?

Before the fall semester began I met with the News Director, Assistant News Director, Web Editor, and the lead Political Reporter at one of our local television news stations. The station's goal was to generate content that would highlight citizen voices. My goals were the ones listed above in the "Project Goals" section. I am a fan of the Michele Norris Race Card Project, and after some discussion, mentioned the Project. I wondered if this would be a way of gauging community opinion regarding the election in a structured way I felt would be attainable for students who are juniors and seniors in college. They liked the idea, but wanted to change it from six word stories to eight word stories because they are Channel 8. While at the station we worked together to craft a standard question the students would ask of the community members: *This election year what are you thinking about?*

In early September the students and I began studying how the media covers politics. We watched several current news reports from different broadcast news outlets. We talked about the horse race nature of much of this coverage, which led to a discussion about how we might be able to hear voices in the community more clearly. In mid-September Channel 8's Chief Political Reporter visited the class to talk about covering politics, best practices when interviewing people, and about the project the students would be working on in conjunction with the station.

Following the visit I gave students an assignment sheet that explained the project. We reviewed it in class. The expectations for the assignment were as follows:

- Work in pairs to produce two stories
- Video record two different interviews in two different locations in the community.
- Ask people to respond in a sentence of eight words to the question: This election year what are you thinking about?
- Have the interviewees write down their responses on the white boards and then explain their responses.
- Get a long shot of the person with the white board, and a close up of the board. Make sure you record b-roll at your location.
- Stories need to run around 1 minute 15 seconds
- These are natsound pieces with no reporter track
- Get the name of the person interviewed and where they're from so lower third supers can be created.
- Let those you're interviewing know you're college students working with Channel 8.

After reviewing the assignment details we looked at Michele Norris's Race Card Project website and stories and discussed them. Next, as a group, we brainstormed locations. Some of the locations students came up with included: A farmers market, a brewery, a bowling alley, a movie theater, a pizza place, a street fair, and a tattoo studio. Each student then chose a location and a partner.

The natsound packages were turned in during the last week of September. The students and I watched and critiqued them in class. I then collected them to provide more specific feedback. We also spent time talking about their experiences doing these interviews and any challenges they faced. Many noted getting people to talk about politics was hard at first, but once they were able to get someone to talk they enjoyed the interview process. Several also realized just how politically different the community members' views were from their own. Revised stories were turned in the second week of October. The stories were then sent by the instructor to the station where some of them were chosen to run on-air and the remainder ran online at the end of October/beginning of November, prior to the election.

### **How did students react? What were the take-aways?**

The students were excited to engage in this project because they knew they were producing stories that would run on a professional news outlet. While many of them initially were not very excited about producing political stories, once they began interviewing people in the community, and realized what community members were concerned about, they became more excited and interested.

On course evaluations many listed this as their favorite assignment. Some commented they appreciated being forced to get out into the community and talk to people about politics, even though it was scary at first. Others felt having the structure of the eight word stories, while initially feeling limiting, actually made things easier because it allowed those they were interviewing to focus on what they wanted to say.

The key take-aways for students were the ability to interview people in the community and overcome their fear of interacting with those who are different than themselves, engaging in community storytelling, and the ability to produce a news story to professional television and web standards.