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Code Switch

RJI alumnus helps launch NPR's Code Switch desk.

Story by Erik Potter

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Matt Thompson is looking for context. It motivated his 2008–09 fellowship with the Reynolds Journalism Institute, where he launched a niche website that offered a trove of links and background stories about economic development in Columbia. The idea was to help people understand today's news by pulling together stories of the events that led up to it.

His search has now taken him to NPR headquarters in Washington where he is the manager of the network's Code Switch desk, launched in April 2013, which provides context on race and culture.

Part blog, part radio stories and soon part podcast, Code Switch explores how people's race, ethnicity and culture shape the way they experience the world.

“Code Switch” is a linguistic term originally defined as switching between languages. But it has taken on a broader cultural meaning to describe how people change the way they present themselves, Thompson explains, such as when politicians start changin’ the way they talk when speakin’ to a Southern audience.



Matt Thompson photo courtesy of Reynolds Journalism Institute.

But we all code switch. “We present ourselves differently in different contexts,” Thompson says. “We speak and dress more formally in professional settings than we would at a family barbecue.

“It’s a great metaphor for the dialogue that spans culture.”

Plans for the team started in early 2012.

“Launching the Code Switch team has been the biggest project I’ve undertaken,” Thompson says. Two of the team’s six reporters came from within the NPR family; the other four he hired from a pool of 1,300 applicants.

Thompson said his role as team manager was a natural evolution. When NPR’s new CEO, Gary Knell, came on board in 2011, he was passionate about

finding ways to increase the network's coverage of race and ethnicity, says Thompson, who was an early participant in those conversations.

“As plans developed, it was sort of, ‘Matt, would you like to be on top of hiring and building the team?’ ” he says. “It was pretty organic; it was neither a job given nor a job claimed. It’s been a fantastically fun process so far.”

You can also find Code Switch on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Topics: [Alumni](#), [Journalism and Communication](#), [Web Exclusives](#)

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