

# A Reckoning Over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists

What's different, in this moment, is that the editors of our country's most esteemed outlets no longer hold a monopoly on publishing power.

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**By Wesley Lowery**

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It was a brief interaction, during the first weeks of my career. There had been a stabbing, and I'd been dispatched to a block in Roxbury, a predominantly black section of Boston, to snag quotes from anyone who might know anything about what had happened.

"Who are you with?" inquired the first person I had approached, a black man in his 50s. "The Globe?" he exclaimed after hearing my response. "The Globe doesn't have black reporters. What are you doing over here? You lost? Y'all don't write about this part of town."

His complaints and his skepticism were familiar, voiced for decades by black people both outside newsrooms and within them — that most American media organizations do not reflect the diversity of the nation or the communities they cover and too often confine their coverage of black and brown neighborhoods to the crime of the day.

Now, almost a decade later, as protesters are taking to the streets of American cities to denounce racism and the unabated police killings of black people across the country, the journalism industry has seemingly reached a breaking point of its own: Black journalists are publicly [airing years of accumulated grievances](#), demanding an overdue reckoning for a profession whose mainstream repeatedly brushes off their concerns; in many newsrooms, writers and editors are now also openly pushing for a paradigm shift in how our outlets define their operations and ideals.

While these two battles may seem superficially separate, in reality, the failure of the mainstream press to accurately cover black communities is intrinsically linked with its failure to employ, retain and listen to black people.

Since American journalism's pivot many decades ago from an openly partisan press to a model of professed objectivity, the mainstream has allowed what it considers objective truth to be decided almost exclusively by white reporters and their mostly white bosses. And those selective truths have been calibrated to avoid offending the sensibilities of white readers. On opinion pages, the contours of acceptable public debate have largely been determined through the gaze of white editors.

The views and inclinations of whiteness are accepted as the objective neutral. When black and brown reporters and editors challenge those conventions, it's not uncommon for them to be pushed out, reprimanded or robbed of new opportunities.

The journalist Alex S. Jones, who served as a longtime director of Harvard's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, [wrote](#) in "Losing the News," his 2009 book, "I define journalistic objectivity as a genuine effort to be an honest broker when it comes to news." To him, "That means playing it straight without favoring one side when the facts are in dispute, regardless of your own views and preferences."

But objectivity, Mr. Jones wrote, "also means not trying to create the illusion of fairness by letting advocates pretend in your journalism that there is a debate about the facts when the weight of truth is clear." He critiqued "he-said/she-said reporting, which just pits one voice against another," as "the discredited face of objectivity. But that is not authentic objectivity."

It's striking to read objectivity defined that way — not because it's objectionable, but rather because it barely resembles the way the concept is commonly discussed in newsrooms today. Conversations about objectivity, rather than happening in a virtuous vacuum, habitually focus on predicting whether a given sentence, opening paragraph or entire article will appear objective to a theoretical reader, who is invariably assumed to be white. This creates the very illusion of fairness that Mr. Jones, and others, specifically warn against.

Instead of telling hard truths in this polarized environment, America's newsrooms too often deprive their readers of plainly stated facts that could expose reporters to accusations of partiality or imbalance.

For years, I've been among a chorus of mainstream journalists who have called for our industry to abandon the appearance of objectivity as the aspirational journalistic standard, and for reporters instead to focus on being fair and [telling the truth](#), as best as one can, based on the given context and available facts.

It's not a novel argument. Scores of journalists across generations, from gonzo reporters like [Hunter S. Thompson](#) to more traditional voices like Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, have advocated this very approach. Mr. Kovach and Mr. Rosenstiel lay it out in detail in their classic text "[The Elements of Journalism](#)."

Those of us advancing this argument know that a fairness-and-truth focus will have different, healthy interpretations. We also know that neutral "objective journalism" is constructed atop a pyramid of subjective decision-making: which stories to cover, how intensely to cover those stories, which sources to seek out and include, which pieces of information are highlighted and which are downplayed. No journalistic process is objective. And no individual journalist is objective, because no human being is.

And so, instead of promising our readers that we will never, on any platform, betray a single personal bias — submitting ourselves to a life sentence of public thoughtlessness

— a better pledge would be an assurance that we will devote ourselves to accuracy, that we will diligently seek out the perspectives of those with whom we personally may be inclined to disagree and that we will be just as sure to ask hard questions of those with whom we're inclined to agree.

The best of our profession already does this. But we need to be honest about the gulf that lies between the best and the bulk.

It's possible to build journalism self-aware enough to bridge that gap. But it will take moral clarity, which will require both editors and reporters to stop doing things like reflexively hiding behind euphemisms that obfuscate the truth, simply because we've always done it that way. Deference to precedent is a poor excuse for continuing to make decisions that potentially let powerful bad actors off the hook and harm the public we serve.

Neutral objectivity trips over itself to find ways to avoid telling the truth. Neutral objectivity insists we use clunky euphemisms like “officer-involved shooting.” Moral clarity, and a faithful adherence to grammar and syntax, would demand we use words that most precisely mean the thing we're trying to communicate: “the police shot someone.”

In coverage of policing, adherents to the neutral objectivity model create journalism so deferential to the police that entire articles are rendered meaningless. True fairness would, in fact, go as far as requiring that editors seriously consider not publishing any significant account of a police shooting until the staff has tracked down the perspective — the “side” — of the person the police had shot. That way beat reporters aren't left simply rewriting a law enforcement news release.

Moral clarity would insist that politicians who traffic in racist stereotypes and tropes — however cleverly — be labeled such with clear language and unburied evidence. Racism, as we know, is not about what lies in the depths of a human's heart. It is about word and deed. And a more aggressive commitment to truth from the press would empower our industry to finally admit that.

The failures of neutral objective journalism across several beats in the news media are countless. And these shortcomings have real consequences for the readers we are sworn to serve — particularly black readers, who we know are more likely to have interactions with the criminal justice system (whose leaders we court), more likely to be the targets of white supremacists (whom we commonly indulge) and more likely to have lives made more difficult by racist politicians and implicitly racist policies that we repeatedly refuse to call out.

Black journalists are speaking out because one of the nation's major political parties and the current presidential administration are providing refuge to white supremacist rhetoric and policies, and our industry's gatekeepers are preoccupied with seeming balanced, even ordering up glossy profiles of complicit actors. All the while, black and brown lives and livelihoods remain imperiled.

Ideally, the group of journalists given the power to decide what and whom to give a platform in this moment would both understand this era's gravity and reflect the diversity of the country. Unfortunately, too often that is not the case.

Perhaps the most recent controversy to erupt because of such thoughtlessness and lack of inclusion was provided by The New York Times Opinion section, when it [published an essay](#) by Senator Tom Cotton, a Republican from Arkansas, calling for, among other things, an “overwhelming show of force” by the American military in order to quell civil unrest at protests that, while at times violent, have largely been made up of peaceful demonstrations.

A method of moral clarity would have required that leadership think very hard before providing the section's deeply influential platform to any elected official — allowing him or her to opine, without the buffer of a reporter's follow-up questions, using inflammatory rhetoric. It would require, at the very least, that such an article not contain several overstatements and unsubstantiated assertions.

“We find the publication of this essay to be an irresponsible choice,” the NewsGuild of New York, a union that represents many Times employees, [said in a statement](#). “Its lack of context, inadequate vetting by editorial management, spread of misinformation, and the timing of its call to arms gravely undermine the work we do every day.”

Let's take a moment to be honest about what actually happened in this case: An op-ed page accepted an essay from a firebrand senator. It published that column without adequate line or conceptual editing. Then it got called out for it, leading to the resignation of one man in top leadership and the reassignment of another.

It was a rare case of accountability, yet it remains to be seen if the changes at The Times will include aggressively tackling a culture that leaves its own staff members so internally powerless that they have to battle their own publication in public.

Despite the [suggestions](#) of an increasingly [hysterical](#) set of [pundits](#), this fallout was not an attack on the very concept of public debate. It's the story of a group of Times employees concluding that a specific piece of content and the process by which it was published was beneath the standards they are asked themselves to uphold — then having the audacity to say so.

The journalists — the black journalists — who pushed back most forcefully on the Cotton Op-Ed essay were not calling for an end to public discourse or the censorship of opinions they dislike. They were responding to the particularly poor handling of a particularly outlandish case during a particularly sensitive moment.

The turmoil at The Times and the simultaneous eruptions inside other newsrooms across the country are the predictable results of the mainstream media's labored refusal to racially integrate.

It's been more than 50 years since the first black journalists appeared in mainstream American newsrooms. For all of that time, black journalists have made meager demands: Please hire some more of us. Please pay us the way you do our colleagues. Please allow us to ascend to leadership roles. Please consider our opinions about how accurate and fair coverage of all communities, especially our own, can be achieved.

Collectively, the industry has responded to generations of black journalists with indifference at best and open hostility at its frequent worst.

Black journalists are hired and told — sometimes explicitly — that we can thrive only if we don't dare to be our full selves. Frequently, when we speak out about coverage that is inaccurate or otherwise lacking, we are driven from newsrooms — which results in fewer experienced black candidates in the room when it comes time to hire for senior editorships.

That, in turn, results in coverage that continues to miss the mark, which leaves the now dwindling ranks of black journalists both ostracized and fighting to speak out. Similarly negative [experiences have been shared by](#) Hispanic, Asian, Native, immigrant (both documented and undocumented), Muslim, gay and lesbian, transgender and gender-nonconforming journalists, too.

What's different now, in this moment, is that the editors no longer hold a monopoly on publishing power. Individual reporters now have followings of our own on social media platforms, granting us the ability to speak directly to the public. It is, then, no coincidence that after decades of pleading with management, black journalists are now making demands on Twitter.

If recent years have taught black journalists anything, it's that public embarrassment appears to make our bosses better hear us. But humility and attentiveness don't have to be isolated to crises. Instead of consistently attempting to censor the crucial personnel of color on their own staffs — who consistently deliver the best of their journalism — the leaders of America's newsrooms could consider truly listening to them.

As I stood on that street corner in Roxbury as a cub reporter all those years ago, the man I'd approached told me that years earlier a family member had been wrongfully arrested. He said the paper printed his relative's full criminal history, as well as a mug shot from an unrelated incident. There had been no follow-up when his loved one was later cleared of the crime.

I told him that I understood why he was still upset and that it did sound pretty messed up, before tucking my notebook into my back pocket and turning to leave.

“Hey, kid! What was it you wanted to know about?” he asked. “The stabbing?”

For years, he'd waited for the chance to tell off a Globe reporter. And now that he had, and had been heard, he wanted to help me tell the story, and get it right.

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