

## Arizona Public Media Community Advisory Board Presentation

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Today, I'd like to talk about controversies in journalism today and the louder and louder calls to re-examine "objectivity" as a standard at a time when the President and his party embrace deception as a political strategy.

Unbelievable time: maintaining truth and ascertaining facts in the face of active disinformation and propaganda, spin, attack and Orwellian language like alternative facts, chain migration, family separation, Kung flu, and this Trump sentence: "What you're seeing and what you're reading is not what's happening." (next slide)

Today, we'll look at:

1. The Cotton case and Margaret Sullivan critique in the Washington Post, as well as the NPR decision to drop the morning COVID-19 briefings.
2. Larger context here seemed to electrify and galvanize the reaction to Cotton case, in particular. George Floyd is killed, and simmering issues of racial disparity and discrimination within a number of newsrooms surfaces. We'll review some of the recent cases.
3. I'll look at how news organizations like AZPM, the New York Times, and the BBC uphold their mission of seeking truth and reporting it, while trying to maintain standards of neutrality, impartiality, objectivity – along with being accountable when things go wrong. We'll look at the ethics codes that scaffold these standards.
4. Then, before I take questions, I'll tell you a bit about what students in our program are being taught.

By the way, there's a great piece in New York Review of Books this week by the wonderful columnist for the Irish Times, Fintan O'Toole, about this "Unpresidential" time. (next slide) He quotes an HH Munro short story,

where a character addresses the House of Commons: “The people of Crete unfortunately make more history than they can consume locally.” Yep, you can say the same about Washington.

### *Review of Cotton case and Sullivan article*

The Cotton article was published June 3 and prompted the dismissal of the James Bennet, the OpEd editor who didn’t actually read the article, and the transfer of the editor who did. More than 1,000 NYT employees signed a letter of protest. You saw that it was an inflammatory screed, with a distinct lack of coherent logic behind the idea of imposing military rule in cities with violent protests. Several assertions were just plain wrong – police bore the brunt of the violence, cadres of left-wing radicals like antifa provoked the demonstrations, and the protests themselves were “carnivals for the thrill-seeking rich.”

But the Cotton piece came after several other issues involving the editor, James Bennet. (next slide) After he returned to the paper from The Atlantic Monthly, which he had edited for several years, he made some controversial decisions.

Two notable hires that drew criticism: Bret Stephens, who gave air to climate change deniers in one of his first columns, and Bari Weiss, who resigned with a dramatic flourish on Tuesday, accusing the Times of being edited now by Twitter. She was controversial as a pro-Israeli activist who complained regularly that left-wing fascists were trying to silence her. She now says the same thing about the Times.

Bennet also is responsible for language in an editorial that led to a defamation suit against the paper by Sarah Palin. Bennet inserted a sentence into an editorial about the shooting of congressmen at a ballgame three years ago by a Sanders supporter. It said flatly that Jared Loughner was incited to shoot Gabrielle Giffords because of a Palin PAC that put Giffords and other Democrats under stylized crosshairs. Times retracted this and corrected it.

Finally, as his brother Michael ran for president, James recused himself from editorial coverage of the candidates themselves, but there were questions in the newsroom and on the editorial pages – the two sections are completely separate – about his recusal decisions on editorials about big national issues like taxation, healthcare, privacy, international relations, immigration – well, name a subject that presidential politics does not touch on.

The publication of the Cotton came a time when journalists, not only at The Times but at other news organizations around the country, are protesting the complacent status quo. Many of the younger journalists have taken critical race studies in college and are particularly sensitive to issues of structural racism in all institutions, including the media, not just in law enforcement.

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In just the last three months, management of major news organizations beyond The Times has been challenged.

In the Philadelphia Inquirer, a headline “Buildings Matter, Too” on a story by the architecture critic, Inga Saffron, caused the resignation of the executive editor. Given the pain and anguish expressed in Black Lives Matter, which highlights structural racism in American institutions, this headline was seen giving false equivalency to Black lives and buildings.

At the LA Times, there’ve been protests over lack of coverage of pressing social ills in what is now a majority minority city, and Norm Pearlstine, the exec editor issued an apology. (Census: Non-Hispanic whites represent about 28 percent of population as of 2018).

There was a contentious meeting with the editor of the Washington Post, Marty Baron, over hiring, promotion, pay and retention disparities for Black employees.

The former editor of the WSJ, Gerald Baker, had joined the news staff after he stepped down but was reassigned to the opinion pages after he wrote a story asserting that Black people commit more hate crimes than whites.

(Justice dept data says 54% of offenders were white and 24% Black in 2018.)

Bon Appetit and Variety magazines both saw top editors resign over pay disparities and discrimination alleged by Black and Hispanic employees, along with sexual harassment. And the Times reported this weekend that behind the scenes, Black journalists at ESPN have been speaking out about racism and barriers they face at the network.

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On the other side, some young journalists who violate the ethics standards of conduct have recently been disciplined or dismissed.

Most famous is Wesley Lowery, who resigned from the Washington Post this year after being disciplined for some of his tweets that criticize stories within his paper and also at other papers, and that decry the idea of objectivity. He was part of the team that won a Pulitzer in 2016 for reporting on the police. One of his tweets said: "The old way must go. We need to rebuild our industry as one that operates from a place of moral clarity." He recently expanded on this in an OpEd in The Times.

Another is a young reporter in Pittsburg, Alexis Johnson, who is 27, was prohibited from covering Black Lives Matter because of a flippant tweet.

*"Horrifying scenes and aftermath from selfish LOOTERS who don't care about this city!!!!!" she wrote. "... oh wait sorry. No, these are pictures from a Kenny Chesney concert tailgate. Whoops."*

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Some context here: many newspapers in America are in terrible trouble financially. In the last 15 years, 25% of America's newspapers have closed and 45% of newspaper staffs have been laid off. Many are now owned by investment bank and hedge funds, which have applied tremendous financial pressure, furloughs, layoffs, and pay cuts as COVID destroyed whatever advertising was left. (Maybe you saw Dan Barry's wonderful piece last Saturday about the last reporter at the Pottstown, Pa., Mercury.)

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Penny Muse Abernathy at UNC-Chapel Hill has a wonderful site managing the information about what she calls growing “news deserts” around the country.

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At the same time, trust in the media in America is still quite low. A minority of Americans (41%) have a “great deal or fair amount” of trust in newspapers, television and radio to report the news “fully, accurately and fairly.” According to Gallup, but similar to other polls, including Pew and Quinnipiac. This 41% is actually up from the record low of 32% in 2016 as the Trump war against the press was at its most successful.

In this time Margaret Sullivan in her piece asks: “In this polarized, dangerous moment, what are journalists supposed to be now?”

When you ask this question to the average American, you hear: “fair and balanced, just the facts, no interpretation or spin.”

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And yet, when you interview these folks more deeply you find these contradictions:

- They want us to be neutral and yet to investigate
- They want us to be disengaged, aloof, voice of God or Cronkite, but they want us to have an impact, to make change.
- They say they want just the facts, but they also admire context and interpretation.

A better question, Sullivan asks, and one we focus a lot on in our beginning journalism classes, is this: What journalism best serves the real interests of American citizens?

Put another way, as I do in my classes, how best can journalists provide the information that citizens need to be free and self-governing?

Once you ask the question in this way, she argues, then some of the cases become a lot clearer.

- Cotton should have been forced to develop a coherent legal and social argument for sending in the military, and counter views needed to be acknowledged.
- And, of course, we don't want to spend precious airtime having the President tell us to just inject Clorox.

The role of the press is baked into the way in which the founders envisioned our democracy. They were skeptical that the concept of checks and balances would work, in particular that Congress and the courts would prevent a president from exercising autocratic executive control. So they set up an external check that was supposed to check power and advocate for the people – the press.

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Here's how strongly Jefferson felt about it. For Hamilton fans, note that this does not rap easily.

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And, to try to maintain this responsibility and the necessary public trust embedded in the democratic concept, news organizations have developed ethical policies to help guide their staffs.

SPJ's [Society of Professional Journalists] is pretty widely used:

- Seek Truth and Report it
- Minimize Harm
- Act Independently
- Be Accountable and Transparent

The RTDNA [Radio Television Digital News Association] has a similar one, as do other specific organizations. I even have one from the Association of Food Journalists, which particularly emphasizes that food writers should not abuse their positions to get choice tables and better wine.

The New York Times and Arizona Public Media both have strong, comprehensive codes that prohibit the appearance of partiality in many forms, including guidance on political yard signs that might show partisanship, contributing to political campaigns, demonstrating, and participating on community-advocacy boards outside of a media focus.

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But avoiding the appearance of partisanship does not mean neutrality or impartiality on core human principles and values. In the aftermath of the Cotton article, Arthur Gregg Sulzberger told Times media critic Ben Smith, that: “We’re not retreating from the principles of independence and objectivity. We don’t pretend to be objective about things like human rights and racism.”

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And just last week, the BBC amended its ethics policy in similar vein. The ethics policy says that the organization’s first purpose is “to provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them.” They use the word impartiality instead of our objectivity. The change adds flatly: “The BBC is not impartial on racism.”

“Opposition to racism is a fundamental democratic principle, reflected, for example, in the fact that incitement to racial hatred is a criminal offence in the U.K.” It goes on to caution staff not to take part in campaigns like Black Lives Matter and not to post personal opinion on social media or in other formats like an on-air interview.

So, finally, how do these ethics codes get conveyed to our new generation of journalists?

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- We discuss the idea of verification and its relationship to objectivity, which I’ll discuss in a minute.
- Everybody Lies assignment
- They compare and contrast various codes of ethics
- Look at examples of reporters who violated the code – not just journalistic felons like Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass, but people like Jay Solomon of the WSJ (chief foreign affairs correspondent involved in a prospective business deal with an arms dealer.)
- Look at journalists who truthfully reported and verified information, even at peril of their own death -- Marie Colvin, who covered the middle east, and Carmen Aristegui of CNN in Mexico.

- We'll look at some recent cases of reporters like Lowert who've been disciplined. There is always lively debate about the extent to which the publication can control how, when and where you express your own personal views.

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We discuss objectivity at some length. Here I use a slender volume by Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach, called "The Elements of Journalism."

Objectivity is one of the great points of confusion in journalism. A lot of people think it means simply that journalists are free from bias.

But that's not it. The concept was developed precisely because journalists have biases. We all do: Blind spots, preference for comfort zones, our vantage points from our individual geographic origin, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political orientation, abilities, even body type and image.

So once we accept that we all are innately biased, what do we do? Rosenstiel and Kovach argue that objectivity calls for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information and a transparent approach to evidence, precisely so that personal and cultural biases do not undermine accuracy.

Objectivity as a goal in journalism emerged at the turn of the last century, out of the wildly partisan yellow press, partly for economic reasons and partly for social. Adolph Ochs, who bought the NY Times in 1896, set the paper's mission as this: "To report the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of party, sect, or interests involved."

This may have been a lofty ideal, but it was also good business sense in the turn of the century economy. A department store owner would not want to be identified with one segment or faction. He was selling to the new middle class, and politics did not matter. The old model of partisan journalism was not a comfortable home.

Walter Lippmann, the political commentator and press critic, expanded on the idea objectivity. He wrote that all people imperfectly observe, and that



the ideal would be to gather and analyze the facts before reaching conclusions. For those who'd like more history, there's a good essay by Mike Luo in The New Yorker this week entitled "How can the press best serve a democratic society?"

The objectivity standard was furthered during the rise of radio and television and the allocation of scarce broadcast channels, which permitted additional government regulation like the Fairness Doctrine as well as voluntary industry guidelines.

Today, however, with unlimited bandwidth, where every citizen is potentially a publisher, a new generation of journalists is chafing at the idea of objectivity as ever achievable. They argue that ideal journalistic ethics should *require* the disclosure of biases and beliefs, not hide them.

We see this in the rise of partisan outlets like MSNBC and FOX, and even with some hosts on CNN, like Don Lemon. Here, the thinking goes, honesty and integrity and transparency and accountability all require disclosure.

So, what does the future hold?

I have no idea.

But I think that audiences will continue to support channels and information sources that reinforce our own beliefs – because of the comforting rush of endorphins that flood the brain when our beliefs are reinforced. Fox and MSNBC capitalize on our endorphin dependency, I think. And I think without good media literacy, many citizens will confuse click-bait sites and propaganda with those that verify and fact-check news and information.

However, I hope that the nation can build a cadre of smart, educated critical thinkers who continue to consume news and information from organizations adhering to the standards of AZPM and The Times, and that they ALWAYS have a place in this fragmented, noisy, contentious mediascape.

## NOTES

1. How are student journalists being trained? Compare with AZPM policies and NYT policies
  - a. Everybody lies
  - b. SPJ, RTDNA codes of ethics guidance
  - c. Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story. Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.
  - d. Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
  - e. Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.

### RTDNA: Truth and accuracy above all

The facts *should* get in the way of a good story. Journalism requires more than merely reporting remarks, claims or comments. Journalism verifies, provides relevant context, tells the rest of the story and acknowledges the absence of important additional information.

Similarly, political activity and active advocacy can undercut the real or perceived independence of those who practice journalism. Journalists do not give up the rights of citizenship, but their public exercise of those rights can call into question their impartiality.

The acceptance of gifts or special treatment of any kind not available to the general public creates conflicts of interest and erodes independence. This does not include the access to events or areas traditionally granted to working journalists in order to facilitate their coverage. It does include “professional courtesy” admission, discounts and “freebies” provided to journalists by those who might someday be the subject of coverage. Such goods and services are often offered as enticements to report favorably on the giver or rewards for doing so; even where that is not the intent, it is the reasonable perception of a justifiably suspicious public.

Commercial and political activities, as well as the acceptance of gifts or special treatment, cause harm even when the journalists involved are “off duty” or “on their own time.”

## **New York Times policy: Voting, Campaigns and Public Issues**

Journalists have no place on the playing fields of politics. Staff members are entitled to vote, but they must do nothing that might raise questions about their professional neutrality or that of The Times. In particular, they may not campaign for, demonstrate for, or endorse candidates, ballot causes or efforts to enact legislation. They may not wear campaign buttons or themselves display any other insignia of partisan politics. They should recognize that a bumper sticker on the family car or a campaign sign on the lawn may be misread as theirs, no matter who in their household actually placed the sticker or the sign.

Staff members may not themselves give money to, or raise money for, any political candidate or election cause. Given the ease of Internet access to public records of campaign contributors, any political giving by a Times staff member would carry a great risk of feeding a false impression that the paper is taking sides.

No staff member may seek public office anywhere. Seeking or serving in public office plainly violates the professional detachment expected of a journalist. It poses a risk of having the staff member's political views imputed to The Times, and it can sow a suspicion of favoritism in The Times's political coverage when one of its staff is an active participant.

Staff members may not march or rally in support of public causes or movements, sign ads taking a position on public issues, or lend their name to campaigns, benefit dinners or similar events if doing so might reasonably raise doubts about their ability or The Times's ability to function as neutral observers in covering the news. Staff members must keep in mind that neighbors and other observers commonly see them as representatives of The Times.

Staff members may not serve on government boards or commissions, paid or unpaid. They may not join boards of trustees, advisory committees or similar groups except those serving journalistic organizations or otherwise promoting journalism education.

### **Social media:**

- In social media posts, our journalists must not express partisan opinions, promote political views, endorse candidates, make offensive comments or do anything else that undercuts The Times's journalistic reputation.
- Our journalists should be especially mindful of appearing to take sides on issues that The Times is seeking to cover objectively.
- These guidelines apply to everyone in every department of the newsroom, including those not involved in coverage of government and politics.

Peter Baker says: “It’s important to remember that tweets about President Trump by our reporters and editors are taken as a statement from The New York Times as an institution, even if posted by those who do not cover him. The White House doesn’t make a distinction. In this charged environment, we all need to be in this together.

2. Is objectivity obsolete in today’s landscape?
3. Economics and new media