

The Enduring Problem of Journalism: Telling the Truth

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Journalists strive to tell the truth in their news reports, and readers and audiences expect to encounter truth in the reports they consult. Yet journalism often fails to acknowledge a fundamental aspect of its truth-telling project: It can be surprisingly hard to tell the truth.

Those of us in the profession or academic discipline of journalism know the first principle in Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's influential *The Elements of Journalism*: "Journalism's first obligation is to the truth." It is an unexceptionable statement that inspires "absolute unanimity" among journalists and the public. Yet, as Kovach and Rosenstiel observe, it also inspires "utter confusion."ⁱ

This brief essay describes some of the challenges journalists encounter in their attempts to report accurately, truthfully, and honestly. It provides some concrete examples of these challenges by describing a specific set of events and issues in the United States in 1961 and the news coverage they inspired: the Freedom Rides, a pivotal episode in the African American civil rights movement. Finally, this essay will suggest how certain conceptions of truth and journalistic truth-telling might serve journalists and their audiences better than others.

Facts, Meaning, Perspective

A fundamental problem of truth-telling in the professional practice of journalism is that journalists and audiences do not necessarily share a common and irreducible understanding of what "truth" means. What does it mean to produce "truth" in the stories we tell or the reports we construct about the world?

Gathering and verifying facts is fundamental to professional reporting and journalists' efforts to tell the truth. But what is a fact, and how does a journalist know which facts are relevant? Journalists tend to talk about facts as if they were bricks lying about in a field, ready to be found and used to construct the proverbial cathedral of knowledge. But facts, as the intellectual historian Thomas Haskell usefully reminds us, "are just low-level

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interpretative entities unlikely for the moment to be contested.”ⁱⁱ To put the matter differently, journalistic facts are statements about the world that most of us take to be true at a given point in time in a particular community. Facts are not bricks. As Michael Schudson has explained so well, facts are “human statements about the world,” not “aspects of the world itself.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As journalists and readers, we must depend on facts to construct our world. Yet we often do not sufficiently acknowledge that, as “low-level interpretative entities,” facts may not be everlasting. Facts are sometimes contested, discarded, and replaced with new facts. When I was a child, I learned in elementary school that Pluto was one of nine planets in our solar system. Last year, my nine-year-old daughter learned a different fact. She learned there are eight planets in the solar system. It turns out that Pluto is not a planet, after all.^{iv}

Despite all this, journalists must still think about and work with facts. And in the process, they must confront other troublesome features of facts in the truth-telling process. In some instances, the accuracy of a relevant fact may be impossible to determine because of conflicting evidence. Some facts may be hidden from view. In some cases it is unclear whether a statement about the world should be considered a fact susceptible to verification or a value immune to a truth test. In other words, there are degrees of facticity. Some facts are more fact-like than others.

Then there’s the problem of making meaning of whatever facts the journalist grasps. If she only has access to some of the relevant facts, her interpretation may not account for the missing facts. As a result, her interpretation may be wrong, despite her best efforts to tell the truth. In some instances, the array of verifiable facts and their context may be so complex that finding truthful meaning is practically impossible.

Finally, there is the matter of perspective. What constitutes a relevant fact or a reasonable interpretation of facts may differ from one point of view to another or from one community to another. Some truth claims can be resolved; others are perspectival through-and-through.^v

Journalists often attempt to bracket, or set aside, their personal perspectives when they report on the world. In some contexts, this kind of bracketing makes sense and can be achieved. A journalist who believes the 2010 federal health care law is anathema to American society reports on the controversy surrounding the legislation in an objective manner, representing fairly and accurately various points of view. As a professional journalist, she attempts to understand and to represent the issue from perspectives different from her own. But is it always possible for a journalist to perceive and thus to separate personal values and judgments from facts? Is it always desirable?

Truth-Telling in News Coverage: The Freedom Rides

In May 1961 a group of men and women boarded buses in Washington, D.C. They came to be known as the Freedom Riders. The U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that segregation on interstate conveyances violated the Interstate Commerce Act, yet Southern states simply ignored the highest law of the land, embracing instead state-level Jim Crow laws and racial customs.^{vi} The Freedom Riders planned to challenge the racial caste system of the South as they traveled on Greyhound and Trailways buses from the upper through the lower South. They would desegregate the buses on which they were traveling as well as the public waiting rooms, restrooms, and restaurants at bus terminals along their route, which would take them ever deeper into the land of Jim Crow. Black and white, Northern and Southern, intergenerational, the Freedom Riders were committed to the philosophy and practice of nonviolent direct action. They would simply exercise their civil rights as mandated by constitutional and federal law. If met with hostility or violence, they would respond with peaceful nonviolence.^{vii}

The Freedom Rides were a project of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, and its leader, James Farmer. From the beginning, the Freedom Riders self-consciously depended on media exposure to make their work effective. In 1946 W. E. B. Du Bois observed during a gathering of youth activists in Columbia, South Carolina, that the success of the black freedom struggle in America depended on “pitiless, blatant publicity.” He said, “You have got to make the people of the United States and of the world know what is going on in the South. You have got to use every field of publicity to force the truth into their ears, and before their eyes.”^{viii} Before the Freedom Rides began, CORE sent out press releases, but the white mainstream press barely acknowledged the project. However, three reporters and photographers associated with the black press bravely accompanied the riders on the buses, and they were witnesses to some of the most harrowing and transformative events of the American twentieth century.^{ix}

The Freedom Riders encountered only a few minor disturbances during the first days of their trip through the upper South. But the journey turned ugly in Alabama, where they were met with an orchestrated campaign of violence and intimidation involving not only the Ku Klux Klan but also public officials, state and city police, state attorneys, judges, even the governor himself. One of the buses was waylaid and firebombed in Anniston, the Riders beaten. Ku Klux Klanners boarded the other bus en route to Birmingham, kicked and beat the riders with pipes, and stacked semiconscious bodies in the aisle. When the Riders and other passengers were allowed to get off the bus in Birmingham, a mob awaited them. The Birmingham police had promised the Klan fifteen full minutes of uninterrupted mayhem with no legal consequences. It turned into a violent, bloody quarter of an hour.^x

At this point, the Freedom Rides became a major news story. Local journalists in Anniston and Birmingham had captured several shocking photos of the mob violence—a burning shell of a bus on the roadside, a white mob beating an unseen victim in the

Birmingham bus stop, battered and bandaged Freedom Riders. These disturbing images appeared in newspapers and news broadcasts around the country and the world. Howard K. Smith of CBS happened to be in Birmingham working on a documentary at the time, and was tipped off that something big was about to happen at the bus terminal. Although he was not able to capture the violence at the bus stop on camera (the television cameras were not warmed up), he was an eyewitness to the carnage. On national radio and television broadcasts, he gave his own testimony about what happened and conducted interviews with bloody and shaken Freedom Riders.

The Kennedy administration, preoccupied with foreign affairs, was finally forced to confront the domestic problem of civil rights that it had long ignored. The Freedom Riders had achieved the “pitiless, blatant publicity” Du Bois had said was necessary, and the entire nation was paying attention. From this point forward, the Freedom Rides had the attention of major media outlets and the world. As Raymond Arsenault has argued, the Freedom Rides riveted the country’s attention on the civil rights movement.^{xi} And the news media played a significant role in helping the country recognize, acknowledge, and attend to the problem of racial injustice and inequality it had countenanced throughout its history.

Telling the Truth in Troubled Times

I have discussed only a small piece of the larger historical episode of the Freedom Rides, a series of events that unfolded in newspapers, magazines, and television broadcasts across the next several months. But my purpose here is not to provide a complete history of the Freedom Rides and the media coverage they garnered. Rather, I wish simply to explore some of the problems journalists and news media encountered in their efforts to tell true stories about these events. From the outset I want to underscore the remarkable personal courage of journalists who covered the Freedom Rides and many other civil rights events and issues in the South and elsewhere in the nation across what Nikhil Pal Singh has called the “long civil rights era.”^{xii} A great deal of this coverage served the highest aspirations for truth-telling in journalism, even in the midst of a historical place and time when social norms and values were undergoing turbulent conflict and change. The critique I offer of news coverage of the Freedom Rides attempts to avoid presentism; I wish to honor the complexity and confusions of the past even as I ask hard questions about how journalism can fulfill its “first obligation” to the “truth” in troubled times.

Mainstream Southern newspapers, staffed with white editors and journalists, largely reported and commented on the Freedom Rides from a perspective deeply shaped by the white supremacist society in which they lived. Nearly all Southern newspapers at the time condemned the Freedom Riders as outside agitators and radicals, Northern provocateurs creating problems in the South, where none had existed before. This characterization invoked a familiar trope in Southern society: an invader from the North inappropriately intruding into the affairs of the South. But almost half the original riders were born and bred Southerners, so this blanket characterization was false as a matter of fact. A white attitude of

racial superiority was so dominant in the culture that the vast majority of journalists and editors in the South simply did not question their assumptions about the identities of the Freedom Riders. The result was a ubiquitous factual error in news coverage.^{xiii}

The larger claim about the Freedom Riders provoking problems where none had previously existed represented the consensus white view in the South. In a front-page editorial published May 22, 1961, the *Birmingham News* asked Attorney General Robert Kennedy to take action to “stop those who provoke violence.”^{xiv} To the editors, those who provoked violence were the Freedom Riders, not the white mobs who attacked the Riders in Birmingham and Montgomery. The white Southern journalists and press institutions who made such claims were part of what Daniel Hallin has usefully termed the “sphere of consensus,” a metaphysical arena in public life where everyone is understood to agree. In this sphere, “the journalist’s role is to serve as an advocate or celebrant of consensus values.”^{xv} In most of the white South, white supremacy shaped a consensus view of the racial caste system and led most white journalists to view the Freedom Rides not as lawful exercises of civil rights but as illegal breaches of the peace. Did these journalists fail in their professional obligation to report the Freedom Riders’ story without bias and in the service of truth? How can journalists in any historical moment discipline themselves to recognize and to question consensus values that are ethically suspect? Are values ever susceptible to a truth test? Are the factual claims on which many value statements rest susceptible to truth tests?

Many in the national press also suggested that the Riders were responsible for the violence perpetrated against them. The problem of moral equivalency showed up in a great deal of the coverage: treating the Freedom Riders’ nonviolent challenge to state laws as equally responsible for the violence as the government-supported mobs that performed the violence. A *New York Times* editorial suggested the Riders should cease their “courageous, legal, peaceful but nonetheless provocative action.”^{xvi} Walter Lippmann, perhaps the most respected columnist of the era, suggested that the Freedom Riders’ actions created a dangerous confrontation between state and federal governments, and thus could not “be left unlimited and uncontrolled.”^{xvii} Was this moral equivalency a fair and balanced representation of the events and issues surrounding the Freedom Rides? In favoring the maintenance of social order over the lawful exercise of nonviolent direct action to achieve civil rights, were these journalists expressing opinions that were not susceptible to a truth test? Or were they expressing opinions based on an incomplete (perhaps even disingenuous) rendering of facts about legal rights and the federal preemption of state law mandated by the supremacy clause of the Constitution? Were they serving journalism’s obligation to the truth?

Some journalists recognized and rejected the moral equivalency fallacy. Broadcaster Howard K. Smith battled with CBS executives over the degree of editorial comment the network would allow him in his coverage of the Freedom Rides. Smith’s position was against moral equivalency and his superiors’ efforts to balance the conflicting values of a violently

repressive racial caste system with American citizens' lawful exercise of their civil rights. Such an approach, Smith said, was "equivalent to saying that truth is to be found somewhere between right and wrong, equidistant between good and evil." Smith ultimately quit his job over the conflict.^{xviii}

Issues of truth-telling inhere not only in the content of news reports but also in the information gathering stages of a journalist's work. The Freedom Riders integrated buses on regular routes carrying regular passengers. They did not announce their intentions to the bus driver or the other passengers, and the journalists who accompanied them did not reveal the Riders' purpose. Some of the regular bus passengers became victims of mob violence in Alabama. Was it deceptive for the Riders and journalists not to warn these fellow passengers of the possibility of violence? Were the journalists on the bus acting as undercover reporters, and can journalists serve their obligation to the truth if they go undercover? (See Brooke Kroeger's essay in this journal for a compelling discussion of undercover reporting.)

Simeon Booker, an influential reporter for *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, notified the FBI and met with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and his aide John Seigenthaler the evening before the Freedom Rides began to warn them that the Riders might need their assistance if violence broke out. He continued to communicate with officials in the federal government during the violence in Alabama. In acting as he did, did Booker become a participant in, even a leader of, the protests? When he published a third-person, objective account of the events in Anniston and Birmingham in *Jet* magazine without acknowledging the complexity of his role, was he serving his journalistic obligation to the truth? Is it acceptable for different professional norms and standards of truth-telling to govern different press traditions, such as the black press, with its norms of advocacy and protest, and the traditional white press, with its norms of objectivity and balance?^{xix}

I began this litany of truth-telling issues in the Freedom Riders' news coverage by highlighting a factual error in the coverage. I'll close by highlighting another factual error that was reproduced in news reports. A shocking photo of a victim being brutally attacked by the mob at the Birmingham bus terminal circulated widely through newspapers in America and the world, and became an iconic photo of the civil rights era. For days, the victim was misidentified as white Freedom Rider James Peck, who endured the most severe of the beatings in Birmingham. Repeatedly beaten with lead pipes, he suffered six gashes on his head and face, requiring 53 stitches. Disturbing photos of his battered face and body covered the front pages of newspapers everywhere. As it turned out, however, the victim in the iconic photo of the mob beating was not Jim Peck. He was not even a Freedom Rider. Rather, he was the fiancé of one of the regular female bus passengers. His name was George Webb, and he was African American. (Interestingly, the highly respected journalists who wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Race Beat* reproduced this error from the journalistic record of the era in the first hardcover edition of their book, even though historian Raymond Arsenault had set the record straight in his magisterial history *Freedom Riders*, published before *The*

Race Beat. Roberts and Klibanoff corrected the error in the paperback edition.)^{xx} Although this error in the news coverage was likely an honest error, it nonetheless made for a more dramatic and coherent news story. It was narratively useful for the victim of the mob violence to be an actual Freedom Rider and perhaps even a white Freedom Rider.^{xxi}

Conclusion

And so I finish where I began: Telling the truth in the practice of journalism is surprisingly hard. But the challenging and problematic nature of the enterprise does not mean truth-telling should not be the first obligation of the journalist. If we are to have a journalism that serves the public and democracy, truth-telling must be the guiding principle. As the philosopher Judith Lichtenberg said, all practical activity in the world must proceed “on the assumption that there is objective truth, even if sometimes in the end we conclude that within a particular realm the concept of truth does not apply, or that in any case we will never discover it.”^{xxii} Journalism is just such a practical activity.

My discussion of the truth-telling issues and problems in the Freedom Rides news coverage highlights just how complicated journalistic truth-telling can be. Even something as seemingly simple as verifying facts can occasionally trip up the best among us. The best journalists acknowledge that truth-telling is fraught with pitfalls and bewildering choices, yet they continue to aspire to tell the truth. They do so knowing that knowledge is contingent, that facts are not always durable, that truth is often perspectival.

What we need in our public life—both journalists and citizens—is a more sophisticated understanding of and vocabulary for what truth-telling means in journalism and a more humble attitude toward the truth-claims we must inevitably make and assess. I have said elsewhere that “the ultimate arbiter of truth is not the press but rather the public in its vital work in America’s democratic experiment.”^{xxiii} I still believe that. It seems important occasionally to remind ourselves, as Kovach and Rosenstiel suggest, that journalistic truth is “a process over time . . . [in which] the search for truth becomes a conversation.”^{xxiv} Journalists and citizens must engage in this search and conversation together.

ⁱ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 37.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Haskell, “Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric versus Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*” (145-173), in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 157.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 6.

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- ^{iv} Dennis Overbye, "Vote Makes It Official: Pluto Isn't What It Used to Be," *The New York Times*, 25 August 2006, p. A13.
- ^v Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality," 157.
- ^{vi} *Morgan v. Virginia*, 328 U.S. 373 (1946); *Boynton v. Virginia*, 364 U.S. 454 (1960).
- ^{vii} Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-10; Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, 1st ed., hardback (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 242-43.
- ^{viii} W. E. B. Du Bois, "Behold the Land, No. 1, 1964" (an address Du Bois delivered in 1946 at a meeting of the Southern Negro Youth Congress in Columbia, South Carolina) in *Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Country*, ed. Esther Cooper Jackson (USA: Westview, 2000) (essay originally published in *Freedomways*, No. 1, 1964), 9.
- ^{ix} Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 242-43.
- ^x Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 148-59; Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 243-48. For an account of the deep social and political structures of white supremacy in Birmingham during the period, see Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).
- ^{xi} Arsenault, *Freedom Rides*, 157-166; Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 246-52; David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 296-97.
- ^{xii} Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- ^{xiii} Arsenault, *Freedom Rides*, 6; Eric Foner, "Bound for Glory," review of *Freedom Rides* by Raymond Arsenault, *The New York Times*, 19 March 2006, p. G24.
- ^{xiv} "The Birmingham News Urges Bus Riders Be 'Held in Check,'" *The New York Times*, 23 May 1961, p. 29.
- ^{xv} Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 115.
- ^{xvi} "The 'Inescapable Obligation,'" *The New York Times*, 28 May 1961, p. E8.
- ^{xvii} Walter Lippmann, "Tragedy in Alabama," *The Washington Post*, 23 May 1961, p. A13, quoted in John M. Murphy, "Domesticating Dissent: The Kennedys and the Freedom Rides," *Communication Monographs* 59 (March 1992), 67.
- ^{xviii} Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 252.
- ^{xix} Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 110-11, 162-64; Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*, 242-48. See Simeon Booker, "Alabama Mob Ambush Bus, Beat Biracial Group and Burn Bus," *Jet*, 25 May 1961, p. 14.

^{xx} Compare the accounts of Tommy Langston's (*Birmingham Post-Herald*) photograph of the bus terminal mob beating in two editions of *The Race Beat*: Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, 1st ed., hardback (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 247-49, and Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*, First Vintage Books Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 247-49.

^{xxi} Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 155.

^{xxii} Judith Lichtenberg, "In Defence of Objectivity Revisited," *Mass Media and Society*, 2nd ed., ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Arnold, 1996), 225-42, 236.

^{xxiii} Kathy Roberts Forde, *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 217.

^{xxiv} Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 45.