



Roger Cohen- The Outcry Over ‘Both Sides’ Journalism

Moral clarity or only one acceptable truth?

By Roger Cohen
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The acting editorial page editor, Kathleen Kingsbury, [wrote about the decision](#) to publish our writers’ responses to the Tom Cotton Op-Ed in Friday’s edition of our Opinion Today newsletter.

I have never believed much in the notion of journalistic “objectivity.” We all bring our individual sensibilities to bear on what we write. Great journalism involves the head and the heart, the lucidity to think and the passion to feel, the two in balance.

If you have lived a privileged white life, as I have, you can and must make the effort to understand what it is to have lived an oppressed black life, to know what it’s like to walk into a building and be asked if you are the help, to see the police not as protector but threat, to know that some view your life as cheap.

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In all the places I have worked, from South Africa, where I had spent my infancy, to Nigeria, to Brazil, I have tried to do that, writing stories about injustice and the ravages of misery. But I cannot inhabit the minds of the subjects of those pieces, however hard I tried.

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If I have always been skeptical of objectivity I have always believed in fairness. That is to say, in the attempt to speak to people on both sides of a question, to report your way to some approximation of the truth by filtering diverse views.

That is what distinguishes a journalist. Heading toward the storm in the opposite direction from the crowd, seeking understanding by being there, in Jerusalem and Gaza, in Tehran and Washington, in Cape Town and Khayelitsha. Bearing witness involves looking into the eye of strangers whose lives and ideas seem irreconcilable.

“I’m a writer,” James Baldwin wrote. “I like doing things alone.” To be alone on deadline is the journalist’s lot, facing the many-faceted world and seeking the means to render it, as closely as possible, knowing that something in the quiver of life is always ineffable and will slip through the cracks.

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When, in Sarajevo, I covered the war in Bosnia and watched lives blown away daily by indiscriminate Serb shelling, I made the effort to cross the lines to speak to the nationalist leaders who had twisted Serbian victimhood into a license for mass murder of Bosnian Muslims.

Gen. Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, both since convicted of genocide by an international court, were delirious in the belief that the Muslims were the old Ottoman Turk enemy, that the Serbs were victims not perpetrators. History, I learned, can illuminate but also blind.

These men were heinous. Should I have spoken to them? I thought the quest for understanding demanded it. I don’t think I was objective. My goal was to describe evil.

Today, a quarter-century later, journalists inhabit a historical fault line. There is a movement in people’s minds. The ancien régime is crumbling, and when that happens there are decapitations.





The shift was well captured by Wesley Lowery, a black journalist who left The Washington Post after he clashed with the paper’s white executive editor, Marty Baron, over The Post’s social media policy and, more broadly, what constitutes “journalistic integrity.” Lowery, as [reported by my colleague Ben Smith, tweeted](#) in early June that:

“American view-from-nowhere, ‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sides journalism is a failed experiment. ... We need to rebuild our industry as one that operates from a place of moral clarity.”

I still believe in both-sides journalism. “A place of moral clarity” can easily mean there is only one truth, and if you deviate from it, you are done for. The liberal idea that freedom is served by open debate, even with people holding repugnant views, is worth defending. If conformity wins, democracy dies.

Lowery’s tweet came in response to The Times’s publication of an Op-Ed by Senator Tom Cotton calling for the deployment of troops to quell civil unrest as demonstrators took to the streets, enraged by the killing of George Floyd, a black man, by a white police officer. The piece was odious; the editorial process behind it, flawed. A staff outcry ensued, driven in part by the view that the article was directly threatening, especially to African-American journalists. This led to the resignation of James Bennet, the former editorial page editor, and to the paper saying that publishing the piece was a mistake.

Cotton’s dangerous views are supported by millions of Americans, including Trump. If he is not publishable — and, in the current climate, I believe that even flawlessly executed his Op-Ed would have provoked fury at The Times — then an old liberal journalistic consensus is waning. That feels ominous.

Speaking of truth, I was Bennet’s boss when he covered the Second Intifada with extraordinary bravery and aplomb. He was mine until a few days ago. He is a man of exceptional honor and decency, humanity and sensitivity — a thoughtful, progressive, nuanced, open-minded colleague for over two decades, “journalistic integrity” personified. This is a terrible loss.

I also recognize another truth: that the Floyd killing illustrated that racism in the United States is systemic, and white-dominated American newsrooms are ill-equipped to deal with this reality because only more diversity can capture multiple perspectives.

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