

Gateway Journalism REVIEW

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2020 ELECTION STRESS TEST FOR DEMOCRACY

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by Paul Wagman

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Year four of Trump's assault on truth

This is a series of opinions on President Donald Trump and his assault on the truth, written by Gateway Journalism Review's publisher William H. Freivogel. You can read the series on our website.

The final act?

by William H. Freivogel

The 2020 election and Trump presidency are stress tests for American democracy and its first principles of freedom, equality and democratic elections. In our democracy, an enlightened citizenry, informed by a free press, renders its judgment and a losing incumbent peacefully transfers power to a new president.

The transfer of power has happened so many times we take it for granted. Yet, with this self-absorbed man in the White House nothing can be taken for granted.

Will the pillars of this freest and most successful democracy in history withstand this one man's assaults on values, customs and norms that have made our republic an example to the world? Will they withstand his four-year assault on truth during which he has set loose upon the world a Pandora's box of 20,000 lies?

The great story of American democracy is the ever-growing equality, freedom and enfranchisement that have turned a nation of propertied white slave owners into a land where every man and woman has a piece of sovereignty — that piece of sovereignty being the ballot.

The ever-expanding temple of democracy rests on the pillars of five remarkable stories of nation-building, all of which Trump works against.

1. The 400-year fight against slavery, segregation, lynching, discrimination and racism has brought legal equality to Blacks. Yet the knee on the neck of George Floyd showed true equality is elusive especially with Trump calling Black Lives Matter a "symbol of hate" while pleading with suburban women to love him for saving their suburbs from Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J.

2. The centuries-long expansion of suffrage transformed a country founded by propertied white men into a nation of near universal suffrage. The 15th and 19th amendments and the Voting Rights Act paved the way. Yet the Supreme Court eviscerated the Voting Rights Act and GOP-controlled states continue to this day to

disenfranchise voters based on Trumpian fictions about voter fraud. Trump is even planning to change reapportionment to base it on voters, not all people.

3. Women's Suffrage and the women's rights movement stopped schools from firing pregnant teachers and employers from paying women less. Advocates for LGBTQ rights won their own victories against sex discrimination, including same-sex marriage. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrought many of the changes. Yet Trump brands strong women nasty or monsters and the Equal

Rights Amendment's simple statement of legal equality remains unfinished business that will stay unfinished with another Trump term.

4. The Statue of Liberty's invitation to the world to "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" gradually led to a nation of immigrants living up to the E Pluribus Unum motto on the Great Seal of the United States. Yet Trump built a wall and branded many immigrants as drug dealers, rapists and criminals. He used that language of hate again in the final



presidential debate just days before the election.

5. Over the past century the First Amendment has become a powerful shield protecting free speech, freedom of religion and the press from government interference. The press became a fourth estate to check the Congress and president when they lie about wars, weapons of mass destruction and pandemics. Yet Trump invents an alternative universe of false information as he wars against the legitimate news organizations he calls "enemies of the people."

Without this national story of ever-expanding freedom, equality, diversity and enfranchisement, America would be a false promise. The greatness of our nation isn't the freedom and equality that existed at our founding but the ever-growing freedom, equality and enfranchisement won by wars, rights movements and votes.

The thing is that this republic only works smoothly when all of these elements are working together. Everyone - man, woman, gay, straight, Black, white, Republican, Democrat, old, young, rich, poor - must have a vote and must feel they have an equal stake. The free press must sort facts from fictions to inform an enlightened citizenry to make the best democratic decisions.

But this election is different. These past four years have been different.

Unlike any other president, Donald J. Trump threatens to arrest his opponent, his last opponent and his predecessor for

invented crimes that not even his lapdog attorney general will prosecute. These desperate actions follow four years of evading investigation, obstructing justice and flouting the rule of law by freeing henchmen convicted of crimes related to the last election.

Unlike every other president Trump won't promise to turn over power if he is beaten, instead threatening weeks or months of court challenges on a Supreme Court he just packed. That is the act we expect from a tinhorn dictator in some remote corner of the globe, not of a U.S. president.

Unlike every other president Trump freely spreads false claims about his opponents. Recently he retweeted the claim Joe Biden "had SEAL Team 6 killed" to cover up President Obama's supposedly failed assassination of Osama bin Laden. Trump admitted he did not have proof because there is no proof. He said he was just getting "it out there." Journalist Savannah Guthrie reminded him he was president, not a "crazy uncle."

Unlike every other president, Trump has flatly called fake news real and real news fake. When it was reported that he had ordered White House counsel Don McGahn to fire Special Counsel Robert Mueller, Trump called it fake, even though McGahn said it was true.

Unlike every other president he has appeased the Russian dictator, finding it impossible to criticize President Vladimir Putin for interfering with our elections or for placing bounties on the heads of U.S. troops.

Unlike every other president, the most respected leaders of his party and his highest appointments say he is unfit for office. Read the words of Mattis, Kelly, Tillerson, Powell, and Bolton. The military leaders whom Trump once called "my generals" aren't taking orders any longer.

Unlike every other president who praised war heroes, this president ridiculed them. In a fit of anger he complained about having to fly the flag at half-staff for the late Sen. John McCain, a true war hero idolized by Democrats and Republicans.

Unlike every other president who released his tax returns, Trump didn't. He's claimed in TV debates for four years that he really wants to release them, even as he has fought in court to keep them secret. Turned out he paid only \$750 the year he was elected, less than tens of millions of hard-working Americans who voted for him.

Unlike every other president, Trump continued to profit from his businesses while serving as president, even trying to force world leaders to meet at his resorts. In fact, Trump's personal lawyer, Michael Cohen, admitted negotiating with Putin's aides for a Trump tower in Moscow until a few months before the 2016 election. Cohen went to prison for lying about it to Congress, but Trump blithely went on making money and ignoring the Constitution's prohibition of emoluments.

Unlike every other president, this man uses the bully pulpit of his Twitter account

to actually bully Blacks, women, Hispanics, immigrants, black professional athletes, female athletes, Gold Star parents. He insulted hundreds of people on Twitter and told more than 20,000 lies, by the Washington Post's count, with the rate of lies doubling this past summer.

Unlike every other president, this president when faced with the national crisis of COVID-19 has failed to bring people together but has instead separated them by floating false information about ineffective cures and by ridiculing those who take safety precautions such as wearing masks. He lies again and again about the advice of Dr. Anthony Fauci on masks and repeatedly pressures scientists to bend to his political will.

And then there is this man's indecency. He brags about the way he assaults women, calls women who complain about his assaults liars and writes checks while in the White House to reimburse his lawyer for hush-money to an adult entertainer who said she had sex with him.

Oh, and don't forget there were some good people among the torch carrying Nazis in Charlottesville, or that the Proud Boys should "stand by," or that Q Anon is working hard against pedophilia when it is falsely claiming top Democrats are operating a sex ring. And yes, lock her up - the her this year being Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, even if that's what the 14 Michigan militia members were trying to do as part of their terror plot.

But there is nothing so disturbing as the president's ineptitude during the Covid crisis and its 220,000 deaths. Trump stubbornly refused to get the message, even after he got sick himself after ignoring his experts' safety guidelines.

The 220,000 death toll is more than five times the battlefield deaths in Vietnam and approaches the 290,000 battlefield deaths in World War II when losses reached into every American community and altered the lives of families forever. That's happening again today but there is no FDR.

And, yes, World War II is another lesson Trump refuses to learn as he offends European allies, cuddles up to dictators, supports Saudi leaders who cover up the torture and murder of a U.S. journalist and undermines the carefully constructed world alliances created to avoid a World War III.

The question is whether the temple of democracy can stand when the president is undermining all its pillars - fighting against expanded suffrage, against racial equity, against women's rights, against immigrant rights, against reliable news organizations, against the rule of law, against the post-World War II order, against free elections and the peaceful transfer of power.

If all these pillars are weakened can the temple of democracy stand? And if there are four more years of this unprecedented assault on the American story, will we still be the freest most successful democracy in history?



PBS NewsHour's Judy Woodruff speaks on objectivity and polarized media landscape

by Amelia Blakely

Before she was considered a "beacon of professionalism and civility" in the journalism industry, PBS NewsHour Anchor Judy Woodruff was starting out at a local television station in Atlanta in an era where women were lucky to be hired in broadcast journalism.

Woodruff was virtually honored Oct. 13 by Gateway Journalism Review, formerly the St. Louis Journalism Review, with its Lifetime Achievement Award for her contributions to journalism over decades as a journalist.

The journalism review also celebrated 50 years while hosting a conversation between Woodruff and Jon Sawyer, the Executive Director of the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting.

Since 2011 Woodruff has anchored the Newshour. In 2016, after the death of her co-anchor Gwen Ifill, Woodruff became the sole anchor of the news program. She is also the Managing Editor.

Woodruff started in national journalism in 1977 when she became a White House reporter for NBC. She later anchored CNN during the Challenger space shuttle disaster, the 9/11 attacks, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. She also co-anchored a seven-hour series, *Democracy in America*, that highlighted some of the anxieties that dominate today's news cycle.

Throughout, she's been setting the standard for excellence in the journalism industry, Sawyer said.

In spite of the idealized version of the objective news broadcaster that is publicly revered, Woodruff said there is no such thing as objectivity.

"I am the sum total of all of my life experiences. I'm a woman, I'm a mother, I'm even a grandmother. I am somebody who grew up as an army brat in Oklahoma, lived in the South, lived overseas. All of that comes together," she said.

Although her life experiences inform her reporting perspective she also considers herself an "old-school" journalist taught how to keep personal opinions out of her reporting.

Fact, Analysis, and Opinion

In today's media landscape viewers have trouble distinguishing between opinion, analysis, and reporting. Journalists should be more mindful about expressing their personal thoughts, Woodruff said.

"There is great reporting going on, but on television news, there is a trend of celebrating and driving opinion. Re-enforcing people's views," Woodruff said. "It takes a strong reporter to be put in some of those situations though because depending on which program you're on or which host is asking you questions you can find yourself in a corner being asked to give your opinion."

Opinion-driven journalism that grabs so much of the public's attention also drives polarization in the political climate, Woodruff said.

Unconventional Debate Approach

The contentious first presidential debate between Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden and President Donald Trump exemplified the divided climate as Trump interrupted Biden and the moderator, successfully derailing the traditional event.

"In the first debate, it was almost impossible to control that. I don't know what else could've been done, other than maybe saying to the candidates, 'we're going to take a pause and take a breath. We're going to stop this debate and come back in 60 seconds to two minutes,'" Woodruff said.

Woodruff said another component influencing people's beliefs and actions is social media because so many people find their news on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube.

News organizations and social media may both be informational platforms, but their missions are different, she said.

"They changed how journalism works for better and worse," Woodruff said. "It's a bloodbath and a lot of it has to do with what has happened with these big social media sites."



Democracy Depends on Great Journalism

American journalism outlets will have to figure out how to make journalism marketable to compete with the new informational market social media sites dominate, she said. The solution will need to be clever and a tenacious approach to keep journalistic enterprises afloat because our country's democracy depends on it, Woodruff said.

A savior, like a billionaire who buys papers and stations like Warren Buffett or Jeff Bezos, is not coming to save news, she said.

"People want to be entertained. Not everyone has an interest in following news and information," she said.

The NewsHour, being funded publicly through the Corporation of Public Broadcasting and donors big and small, is one successful model. Woodruff said that model in combination with others could make a difference in the industry.

Woodruff credited her team of journalists at the NewsHour for adapting and producing critical journalism during the pandemic when about 95% of the staff is working from home.

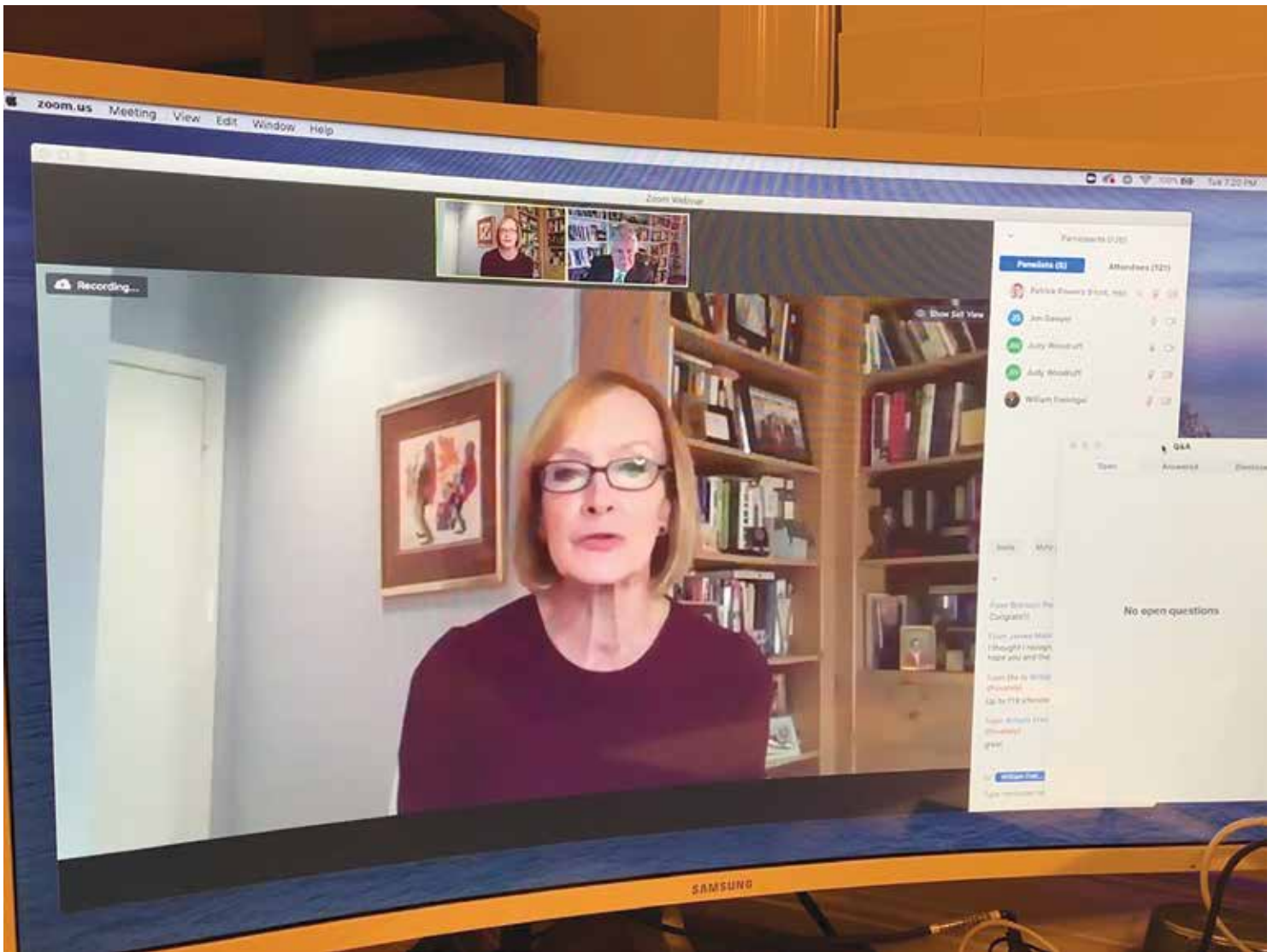
What used to be Woodruff's home library is now her in-home studio filled with lights, cameras, computers and wires, she said.

"It was put together by really smart journalists who learned how to do all of this," Woodruff said. "I marvel at what my colleagues have been able to do."

With the upcoming election, the PBS Newshour team will be focusing on how long it will take for the election results to come in after large sections of the public use mail-in ballots to cast their vote.

"We have to have good information. People that we can call and be in touch with immediately," she said.

Woodruff said the NewsHour is not concerned with being the first news program to declare a winner, but the one that is right.



Excerpts from Judy Woodruff interview

Judy Woodruff, anchor of the PBS NewsHour, discussed the 2020 election in an interview Oct. 13 with Jon Sawyer, executive director of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. The event was a fundraiser for GJR. Here are extended excerpts from that conversation. A video of the entire interview is online.

Cancelation of Second Presidential Debate

Sawyer: The big thing that was supposed to happen this week that is not happening is the presidential debate. You have a lot of experience with Presidential Debates, is that another institution that has been blown by the disruptive tactics of the Trump Era?

Woodruff: *laughs* Those are your words Jon, not mine. I don't know what other words to use for it. Think about the first debate and what that looked like. We've seen contentious presidential debates, arguments, candidates take issues with questions, but we've never seen a candidate, much less the president step on and step over almost everything the candidate and the moderator were saying and

overhauling what is now a traditional thing. The Commission on Presidential Debates puts them on and creates the structure. The first one is the two candidates standing at lecterns, the next one is a town hall meeting, and the third one is seated around a table. The town meeting has now gone away and we don't know what the third one will look like. Yes, it has blown up. I think who knows who will win the election on Nov. 3. I think this will raise more questions to the commission in the future about these debates. On top of that, you have the pandemic, keeping people safe, the president was diagnosed with COVID 2 days later, and all the drama that came with this diagnosis.

Sawyer: As a journalist is there a way to regain control over that process so there is something that conveys useful information to the viewing public?

Woodruff: Since you asked, I don't know what the exact internal rules are. I didn't study the documents that I think they made public around the rules that candidates agreed to but my sense is that there are some pretty

strict rules about moving from topic to topic ... I think I would argue for more flexibility to say okay we're going to talk about the Supreme Court or pick a subject like the Middle East and then try to engage the candidates in a back and forth. The problem with that is if you have a more dominant speaker one of them tries to run away with it and then the moderator is caught trying to stop them and give the other one roughly the same amount of time. So you have to have enough control so if one is running away with it you can stop them and you give the other candidate a chance to have his or her say. But it was almost impossible. I don't know what else could have been done other than maybe just stopping and saying, 'ok we're going to take 60 seconds to two minutes and see if we can get this back on track again. I think maybe in the vice presidential debate you maybe could follow up on issues. But I don't know. It's easy for me to say in retrospect, looking back. I don't know what the rules that the commission established but I think for me, who has done a lot of debates they work

better when you can ask some follow-up questions and really try to pin the candidates down but that's a burden on the moderator.

Are Journalists In Tune With Voters?

Sawyer: What has changed in your view since 2016 in journalism and do you feel more confident that we have a better handle now on what's happening in the country than we did four years ago?

Woodruff: Guilty as charged for missing what was happening in 2016. I can maybe count on 2 fingers people who thought Donald Trump was going to pull it out. There were some who thought that was very doable. But have we learned a lesson? I would say we're very good at learning the specific lesson from the last election of saying, 'okay we're not going to do that again.' But we probably could be making another mistake, whatever it is. I would like to think Jon that we're now better. I should say more on guard in terms of assuming we know everything about how all these states are going to go. We are talking to more sources. We are not assuming any state is going to go one way or another just because some polls show that it will or some campaign managers tell us that they think it's in the bag or whatever they tell us. We are double and triple-checking everything we hear and again not taking anything for granted.

PBS NewsHour Adapting to the COVID-19

Sawyer: What's it been like to reimagine and adapt PBS NewsHour on the fly, by remote because of the pandemic during this unprecedented year?

Woodruff: I marvel at what my colleagues have been able to do. I honestly can't put it any more directly than that. I have some stunningly brilliant colleagues who already were really good at doing field remotes where you go out to report a story and then you edit it in the field on a laptop like you and I are looking at each other on. Then you send it back to the main office in the studio in Washington. What we're doing now is strung together. 95% of our staff, about 150 people are at home. There is some travel. Our White House correspondent Yamiche Alcindor does a little bit of travel. Lisa Desjardins covers the hill and has done a little bit of travel. John Yang has too. Most of what we are doing is interviewing people on a computer and we've had to bring it all together. I like to say chewing gum and you know whatever, yarn. It's obviously much more sophisticated than that. If you could see my studio which is right around the corner from where we are right now it used to be our home library but now it's filled with computers and wires, lights and cameras and it was put together by just really smart journalists who figured out how to do all this. I could never have done it myself.

Media's Role In Political Polarization

Sawyer: How complicit is the media in the creation of the political mess that we're currently in?

Woodruff: That's a subject for a much longer conversation. It's something that we have watched grow in recent years. I think it's come hand-in-hand with the polarization of the American people. The fact that people can now go to their favorite website or cable channel news source and have their own view reinforced by that very opinion driven kind of

journalism. It's not everybody. It's not all of us across the journalism landscape, but it's bigger than it used to be. I'm somebody who calls myself an "old-fashioned" reporter because when I started out, by the way, I studied political science, I had to learn on the fly. The best advice I got when I was hired was, "nobody gives a damn about what Judy Woodruff thinks. We want you to go out and report the news, take notes, and come back with all that information, write a story and we'll figure out how to get it on the air." It was just about that basic and that has stayed with me.

I was taught to keep my view out of my reporting. Young people today asked me all the time 'how do you do that? How do you stay objective?' My answer is: there is no such thing. I'm a mother and a grandmother. I am somebody who grew up as an army brat. I was born in Oklahoma, lived in the south, lived overseas. All of that comes together. Living in Washington, working for PBS, NBC, and CNN. I've had a lot of different experiences and all of that informs what I do, so there's no such thing for me as objectivity. But I try to be as fair as I can. My point is, I feel like a dinosaur! There's just not a lot of that anymore. But on television news, there is a trend of celebrating and driving opinion. Cable news has exacerbated this. Reinforcing people's views and driving opinion. I sure hope old-fashioned journalism has a life way beyond it is today but these days I worry about it.

Election Night Reporting

Sawyer: What do you think election night reporting will look like in the midst of COVID, early voting, voting by mail, all of that. How will journalists report the facts where there are so many unknowns?

Woodruff: That is a wonderful question and it's something we are very focused on right now at the NewsHour. My colleague, William Brangham is working very hard. For example right now on making sure he has sources who can explain to him, and to us if things are going wrong with the vote count. We know the votes are counted in 50 different states, the District of Columbia, the territories, and so forth, so we have to have good information. We have to have people we can call and be in touch with immediately if we're not sure. There is a consortium of news organizations that work together to take in information about vote results. We are all working on that, but we're very aware this year of the mistakes that have been made in the past. Like on CNN on Election night in 2000 when we had two terrible wrong calls. I was burned by that, everybody was burned, and then of course in 2016 people were surprised, expecting Hillary Clinton to win and then finding out lo and behold there was bad polling in key states in the industrial midwest. We were just off and so it's made us all humble. Mix that in with foreign interference, Russian interference, people who were trying to pedal misinformation and disinformation right now. We are sticking close to the sources we trust the Associated Press, the consortium of news organizations... We're not going to be in a rush to call races and predict winners. You know, my mantra has been this year, 'I don't care if we're last, I care about being right.' We also don't know if we're going to know the answer on election night. I think most everybody says it unless it's a landslide one way or another there's a possibility we could be counted on for days afterward so we will have to see.

Illinois primary played pivotal role in elevating Biden

by John S. Jackson

When the annals of the 2020 presidential nominations process and general election are written, the role of the Illinois Primary, along with its counterparts in Florida and Arizona on the same day, will be marked as uniquely important turning points in the long and chaotic road to the White House.

Understanding that role depends on knowing the role mass media, and now social media, have come to play in the modern era when the primaries and caucuses make the crucial decisions in the selection of the candidates who will face off in the general election and the media report and referee the contest.

The calendar drives the evolution of the whole nominations and general election season. The calendar for the nominations contests gives structure to the narrative adopted by the media, and to the strategic plans of the candidates and their campaigns.

The contests unfold in a set and predictable pattern which is dictated by the intersection of the state party rules and state law in all 50 states. This creates a series of hurdles setting up a race that will unfold in a predetermined sequence which candidates, the media, and the voters can understand and plan toward.

This has been true ever since 1972 when the primaries and caucuses took over the process and dislodged the national conventions as the key decision points. As the role of the primaries grew, so did the role of the press. However, in the case of 2020, what should have been fairly predictable turned out to be quite unpredictable in the Age of COVID-19.

Objective Reporting

At the opening of any presidential campaign, the media need a frontrunner and they need the winnowing to begin almost immediately.

Journalists need to tell a story, to develop a coherent narrative so the story can have clarity and coherence.

This role is crucial because we the voters need help in sorting out the choices that face us. Those choices are much more difficult and confusing in a primary or caucus because we don't have the simplifying cue of party identification to guide us as it does in the general election. We are in a confusing and information rich environment where a welter of personalities, issues, ideologies and events have to be sorted out before we vote.

The voters cannot be expected to make much sense, much less a rational choice if there are 29 official candidates facing them at the outset of the primaries season as was the case for the Democrats in 2020. The Democratic National Committee decided that the presidential debates would be their major arena for winnowing the field. They held 10 debates in 2016, and they decided to double that in 2020. They couldn't even get all the candidates on the same stage so some polling and campaign fundraising criteria were set up for winnowing the viable candidates down to only 20 who had

to appear in groups of ten each over two nights. The debates were supposed to be clarifying, but instead they became more confusing, as the loudest and most confrontational voices in the room won the most airtime and media notice.

The Democrats opened the season with no clear frontrunner and that problem only grew worse as the debates and primaries and caucuses proceeded along parallel paths in the early contests. The two candidates most often designated by the press as the frontrunners in the early days were Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders. Both had a legitimate claim, but neither reached any kind of prohibitive frontrunner status at the outset. Biden was the former Vice President under President Barack Obama, and before that he had spent thirty years in the Senate. Bernie Sanders was the head of the most Progressive wing of the party and had given Hillary Clinton a close contest in 2016. Bernie quickly lived up to some of his front-runner status while Biden failed miserably at first.

The traditional opening contests were Feb. 3 in Iowa and Feb. 11 in New Hampshire. Iowa was a mess when the count was delayed by two weeks. Sanders won the most popular votes while Pete Buttigieg won the most delegates. Biden came in fourth. Next came New Hampshire where Sanders won the most popular votes and claimed the mantle of front-runner. He confirmed this status Feb. 22 in Nevada where he won an impressive victory and the media declared him to be the clear favorite if not the prohibitive favorite by then. Biden came in fifth in New Hampshire and a distant second in Nevada. The press began to speculate how much longer he could last without a victory and out of money.

The long-awaited answer

That answer came Feb. 29 in South Carolina. Biden always claimed that South Carolina would be his "firewall" and that he would do well there based on his long association with the state and especially his strong support in the African American community. This support was solidified when the state's most powerful Democrat, Rep. James Clyburn, endorsed Biden. Biden took 49 percent of the popular vote and won 39 of the 54 delegates. He had the momentum.

March 3, was Super Tuesday. It turned into a rout for Biden. He won from Virginia across to Texas and Oklahoma and everything in between. Biden at that point became the favorite, although there were lots of contests yet to go and he was far short of the 1991 delegate votes needed for a first ballot victory. Sanders vowed to press on and his supporters urged him to continue.

Illinois plays important role

Illinois, Florida, Arizona and Ohio were scheduled to hold their primaries March 17. At the directive of Gov. Mike DeWine, Ohio dropped out early on the morning of the primary because of COVID-19 fears. Governor J. B. Pritzker faced similar pressures to cancel the Illinois Primary but he declined to do so citing his lack

of authority to go against state law. When the night was over Illinois provided a huge victory for Biden, as did both Florida and Arizona. It was a clean sweep for Biden. Bernie went home to Vermont to confer with his campaign staff.

The media immediately declared Biden to be "the Presumptive Nominee" even though he still did not have a majority of the delegate votes. Biden went home to Delaware and set up shop in his basement from where he campaigned for the next two months. The media moved on to the fight against the pandemic as the nation was shutting down to fight the virus. They simply could not cover two major stories, the pandemic and the Democratic nominations contests adequately, especially since they also routinely reported daily on whatever message President Trump was tweeting. In early April, Senator Sanders conceded to Biden and warmly endorsed him. He vowed to do whatever he could to support Biden, and urged his supporters to do the same. We had gone from 29 candidates to one in a record six weeks.

Party Coalition

Almost all the former contenders also endorsed Biden by then. The party coalition was coming together to form a solid wall of opposition to Trump. A divisive primary season, which would have been draining on Biden personally and debilitating to his campaign resources was avoided. Instead the campaign pivoted to getting ready for the general election fight against Trump. The Democratic Party was united around that objective whatever their other internal differences may have been. Illinois was essential to that progression. There is actually a theory in political science which maintains that the player who enters the coalition at the point of forming the winning vote is the most powerful and essential participant.

Think for a moment about a counterfactual scenario for the outcome March 17. What if Biden and Sanders had split victories that night with Biden winning Illinois and Sanders winning Florida, as seemed quite possible earlier? Bernie would have been loath to drop out, and his supporters would have urged him to stay in because there were lots of contests left on the calendar. The media would have reported the Democratic Party in disarray story, a story that would have potentially lingered until the last contests were over in June. Donald Trump would have become the benefactor of that development. Instead the three Biden victories of Illinois, Florida and Arizona became the last real story in the Democratic Primaries narrative and then the race was instantly frozen by the media's attention necessarily being focused on the virus. Illinois along with its two other counterparts became the fulcrum which leveraged the early Biden victory in the crowded Democratic primaries and became a contest comparable in importance to South Carolina and Super Tuesday. The 2020 Democratic Primaries results became yet another story reshaped and decided by the vagaries of the COVID-19 virus and the practical necessities and professional norms of the press in how to cover it.

Can St. Louis Public Radio fix problems and regain its footing?

by Jack Grone

The broad outlines of a possible way forward for the troubled newsroom at St. Louis Public Radio are starting to become clear, as interim General Manager Tom Livingston takes stock of the organization and engages staff members in a new effort to tackle diversity concerns.

Livingston, who took over Sept. 22, told Gateway Journalism Review he intends to create an internal working group focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. The intent is to form a group with the teeth necessary to address issues raised by more than two dozen staff members in a July 1 letter to former General Manager Tim Eby and Executive Editor Shula Neuman. The letter focused on what the signers called the station's legacy of structural racism.

Under intense pressure, Eby resigned as GM in September, although he continues to work as a consultant until early April. Neuman remains in her role.

"My job at this point is to listen, and I've done a lot of that," Livingston told GJR during an Oct. 13 phone interview. "In the first meeting I had with the news staff, there were quite a few comments saying 'we can't just keep talking about this; we have to do something.'"

Regarding the working group, Livingston said: "We want to invite a broad cross-section of the staff to participate." He added that he's working closely with University of Missouri-St. Louis Vice Chancellor Tanisha Stevens, who oversees diversity and inclusion efforts at UMSL, as well as with the university's human resources office.

"For my purposes, the power of a group like this is in its agency," said Livingston, who made it clear he expects the station's staff to have concrete input into matters including the hiring of Eby's permanent successor. "We need to work together."

The interim GM conceded that the mood at the station remains tense, with some newsroom staffers still highly skeptical that UMSL is committed to addressing their demands for more diversity and better opportunities for journalists of color.

But if Livingston can convince enough staffers to buy into his efforts, it could mark the beginning of a less contentious phase at STLPR. Since early August, when the accusations of racism went public, several journalists have pointedly criticized the station's managers for what they say is a lack of concrete action. The staffers also made it clear they have no confidence in an investigation UMSL launched in early August. That investigation is expected to release a report soon on the station's track record in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion.

GJR contacted four staff members at



the station to ask for their views on the current situation, including three journalists who signed the July 1 letter. None of them responded before press time.

A period of relative stability could also reassure STLPR's individual donors and corporate sponsors. In 2019 they provided over \$7 million to support the public-service journalism of the station, which boasts one of the biggest newsrooms in the St. Louis area.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic sank the economy, though, STLPR was operating at a loss. In April the station laid off three full-time and two part-time staffers; a few weeks later, UMSL announced pay cuts on a sliding scale of up to 10% to cope with the pandemic.

Livingston told GJR corporate sponsorships are down by about 30% during the current year, in line with a broader trend across public media. For STLPR, that implies lost revenue of roughly \$600,000. Individual donations have remained relatively stable, he added.

In the July 1 letter to Eby and Neuman, the signers identified 20 main action points to be addressed. Their points included job specs for senior roles, recruitment techniques to identify more Black job candidates, more rigorous training programs, rating managers' job performance based on how well they train and mentor employees of color, and ending requirements for Black staff to attend donor galas.

Since then several reporters and editors, often appealing to their significant numbers of followers on Twitter and other platforms, have racked up at least three significant victories (See timeline).

In July they succeeded in forcing the resignation of programming director Robert Peterson. In August, after the journalists went public, Eby admitted to systemic racism at the station, and UMSL launched its investigation. In September came Eby's own resignation.

In the meantime, while other supervisors' heads have rolled, managers like Neuman have tried to keep things on track in the newsroom and on the programming team. The station continues to crank out spot news stories and longform features on the election, COVID-19 and other topics, as well as podcasts such as "We Live Here," which focuses on issues related to race and class.

In an earlier interview with GJR Neuman described the staff as "exhausted," which she attributed to a variety of factors: the pandemic, the stresses of working remotely, and the political uncertainty in the runup to the November elections. Also taking a toll, she said, is a hiring freeze that means the station cannot fill several positions.

STLPR currently has 29 reporters, editors and producers on the news team that Neuman oversees, including the team that produces the station's midday talk show, "St. Louis On the Air." Beyond this there are four vacant reporting positions: science & environment, politics, data reporting and a photojournalist. Neuman said other open roles at STLPR are a senior producer position for podcasts as well as the programming director position that Peterson formerly held.

Livingston has not ruled out further layoffs. "My immediate next priority is to get my arms around the budget," he said. "It's too

St. Louis Public Radio in 2020

July 1: Twenty-six STLPR journalists send a letter to General Manager Tim Eby and Executive Editor Shula Neuman outlining concerns over diversity at the station. They demand the departure of Robert Peterson from his role as director of radio programming and operations. They call for concrete efforts to hire, train and retain more reporters and editors of color (particularly Black journalists). They also ask for better transparency about STLPR's finances, following layoffs and pay cuts earlier in the year.

Late July: Eby announces the retirement of Peterson, who staffers accused of denying professional opportunities to women of color. Under pressure, station managers cancel a planned farewell celebration.

Aug. 7: Staff at the station go public with their complaints. A group calling itself STLPR Reporters & Producers of Color publishes an open letter on Medium calling on Eby and others to take responsibility for "cultivating a culture that perpetuates racism." Simultaneously, the station's only newscaster of color, Marissanne Lewis-Thompson, publishes her own Medium essay detailing specific instances of racism since her arrival in October 2017.

Aug. 10: In a post on the station's blog, Eby admits that systemic racism exists at the station. UMSL launches an investigation led by Vice Chancellor Tanisha Stevens and an external law firm into the station's practices involving diversity, equity and inclusion.

Sept. 5: The Reporters & Producers of Color group expresses concern in a Medium post about the goals and scope of UMSL's investigation, saying they fear staff members who speak up about racism could face retaliation. In a follow-up post on Sept. 17 they say 21 staffers have no confidence in the investigation.

Sept. 24: UMSL administrators announce to staff that Tim Eby is no longer general manager, and that public media consultant Tom Livingston will be managing the station on an interim basis.

Sept. 25-26: Several journalists react angrily on social media after UMSL discloses in a news release that Eby will continue at the station for six months in a "consultancy role." Reporter Brian Munoz, brought on by STLPR to provide independent coverage of the station's woes, later reports Eby will keep earning the same salary, meaning he'll be paid about \$70,000 in total through early April 2021.

soon to tell any additional steps that need to be taken."

It's a sobering time for a journalistic enterprise that had grown in recent years to become the area's second-biggest newsroom after the St. Louis Post-Dispatch where coverage areas like politics, public affairs, education, environment, the arts and race issues are concerned.

Much of this growth was the result of STLPR's merger with the St. Louis Beacon, an online publication dominated by journalists who had worked previously at the Post-Dispatch. After the merger took effect in late 2013, it was hailed as a model for combining nonprofit, public-service media organizations.

"It was a categorical leap forward in terms of size for both organizations," said Margaret Wolf Freivogel, the editor of the Beacon who became editor of the combined newsroom. "It enabled people to pursue beats in more depth. Equally important, it enabled the organization to have not only a radio presence, but a really vigorous online presence."

An early challenge for the merged newsroom was the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson and the protests that followed; Freivogel recalls the station throwing all the resources it had at the story.

Yet even as the station's ambitions grew, Freivogel, who retired at the end of 2015, said its goal was never to become the media outlet of record for St. Louis.

"I don't think the goal was ever to replace the Post-Dispatch," she said. "It's to be the outlet that really focuses on depth and context, and breaking stories that might not come to light if they weren't being done there."

Linda Lockhart, former outreach specialist and copy editor at STLPR, said the station faces the same challenge as organizations like the Saint Louis Art Museum and the St. Louis Symphony: finding ways to engage new audiences as the ranks of their traditional, largely white audiences continue to shrink.

"We have to break out of this mold, and restore honesty and rebuild trust with the audiences: with the readers, the listeners and the donors," said Lockhart, former national secretary for the National Association of Black Journalists and a founding member of the organization's St. Louis chapter. Like Freivogel, Lockhart is a Post-

Dispatch veteran who joined STLPR as part of the Beacon merger.

"How much has been lost these past six months? I don't know how much goodwill has been lost, but I would expect it's significant," Lockhart said.

Looking forward, Livingston has to begin sketching out a road map for an organization that until 2012 had an all-white newsroom. Even today, only one out of five journalists at STLPR is a person of color, according to the Journalists of Color group.

Livingston notes the importance of the arguments the journalists laid out in their July 1 letter.

"Their sense of the situation at the station that led to that memo is critical. The framework they laid out is a very detailed agenda, but the overarching part of it all looks right to me, so that's a starting point for me," Livingston said.

One area that has caused angst in the newsroom is the nature of the station's continuing relationship with UMSL. The Board of Curators of the University of Missouri holds the station's broadcasting licenses.

In a Sept. 25 press release, UMSL Chancellor Kristin Sobolik said the university wants to "best align the work of the station with the needs of our community as well as the academic, research, service and outreach mission of the university."

Some reporters expressed alarm, questioning what Sobolik meant by "align." But Livingston, who reports directly to the chancellor, told GJR that Sobolik understands the importance of the station's editorial independence. As an example of alignment, he said the station's director of finance and administration, Maureen Hughes, now has a dual reporting line: to both Livingston and UMSL Vice Chancellor Tanika Busch, who serves as the university's chief financial officer.

The search for a permanent GM will begin in earnest after a job description is created, Livingston said. As an executive recruiter specializing in public media, he has conducted approximately 350 job searches, including about 100 for a GM role. His work at STLPR is the 13th time he has served in an interim role.

"Having the most diverse candidate pools starts with being clear about what you really need," Livingston said.

How likely is it that the new permanent GM will be a person of color? According to Livingston there are no guarantees, but he made it clear that he expects to station staff to have real input into the process. In past searches involving university-licensed stations, he said staff members have been especially involved in two areas: helping to design the GM position description, and during interviews with finalists for the role.

"Who comes in as the next general manager is critical," said Lockhart. "I can't say absolutely that it has to be a person of color, because there just aren't enough people to pick from. But it has to be somebody who 'gets it' — somebody who is 'woke' to a degree. It's going to be difficult. There's not a lot of trust in the newsroom right now. You don't want to lose your staff."

Freivogel said even though STLPR doesn't know exactly where it will land following the upheavals of 2020, she continues to believe public radio can be the framework for rebuilding in-depth, local news coverage.

"I would hope in the long term that it would enhance the ambitions of the organization," Freivogel said. "Working through these things is a necessary phase, and hopefully it will lead to a greater degree of trust, and increased capacity in the future."

University of Missouri system president criticized for intimidation, threats to freedom of speech

by Regan Mertz

The University of Missouri Faculty Council approved a resolution to censure Mun Choi, interim University of Missouri Chancellor and University of Missouri System President, on Oct. 15 for failure to follow faculty promotion and tenure guidelines.

The vote comes at a time when professors, including leading journalism professors, have criticized Choi for chilling free speech.

The resolution censured Choi for his failure to read the written recommendations for each candidate before he made his final decision. According to the resolution, Choi was not aware of the recommendations.

The recommendations were provided by the Campus Promotion and Tenure Advisory committee for the 2019-20 academic year.

Seven of the 61 candidates were rejected by Choi.

Choi considered only the votes for each candidate. This violates his responsibilities as chancellor and president, according to the University of Missouri System rules.

Before making his decisions, Choi conferred with the provost, deans and faculty. He then read the recommendations after he made his final decision. He stated the written recommendations did not change his mind.

The University of Missouri Faculty Council's resolution urges Choi to issue a written apology and an explanation for how future Campus Promotion and Tenure Advisory Committee feedback will be considered.

The censure is a statement of formal disapproval for Choi's conduct, but there is no real consequence. The statement is meant to acknowledge that Choi has been censured by the council, said Dennis Crouch, the faculty council's parliamentarian.

"There is no particular impact of this statement," Crouch said in an interview with the Columbia Daily Tribune. "It's just a statement that you did something wrong."

Twelve council members voted in favor of the censure, seven against and three

abstained. There were more members who didn't vote.

Council member Rabia Gregory was quoted in the *Columbian Missouri* suggesting Choi's appearance in the meeting caused some faculty not to vote. "When you appeared in this meeting as we were voting about a possible censure measure, I did a quick number count: A number of people who might have otherwise voted did not vote at all," she was quoted as saying.

Tom Warhover, Missouri School of Journalism professor and Faculty Council member, attended the Zoom meeting where the vote took place. He explained why some people didn't vote.

"We can't say for sure why, but it was not the case for previous votes that day," he said. "It leads an inquisitive mind to wonder why." He confirmed that Choi entered the Zoom meeting.

Choi's behavior toward students and faculty has been under scrutiny since Missouri School of Journalism faculty members sent a letter to Choi in early September. The 15 faculty members who signed the letter stated their dismay in Choi's attitude toward free speech and his contradiction of the J-School's "Missouri Method."

"I don't believe anybody is working here with a malicious intent, but I believe the way the president is giving his thoughts could be way better," Warhover said.

This letter came after university actions against Sabastian Martinez Valdivia, a health reporter for KBIA and an adjunct professor of journalism at the J-School.

In late June, the university refused to remove a Thomas Jefferson statue that sits on the University of Missouri's quad, just down the sidewalk from the Journalism School.

"After further discussion with other curators, the university decided not to remove the Jefferson statue," Choi, also interim MU chancellor, said in a statement. "We learn from history. We contextualize historical figures with complex legacies. We

don't remove history."

This decision spurred activists to protest near the statue, and graffiti has appeared.

One night in June, a red spray painted message showed up on the sidewalk next to the statue. It said, "SAY HER NAME SALLY HEMINGS." A University of Missouri undergraduate took a photo and posted it to his Twitter account.

The next day, police officers from the MU Police Department went to Valdivia's house and asked for an interview. The officers maintained Valdivia matched the description of the suspected person who spray painted the graffiti on the sidewalk, according to Kellie Stanfield, a University of Missouri assistant professor of journalism who lives with Valdivia.

The police officers showed Valdivia print outs of tweets he had written. The tweets criticized the university for its decision to not remove the Thomas Jefferson statue.

Valdivia said he did not deface the statue.

Ryan Famuliner, news director at KBIA, became aware of the situation when Choi emailed Valdivia in late July. Famuliner says the email exchange is a public record because it occurred on official university accounts. Famuliner tweeted the screenshots of the emails.

In response to Choi's emails to Valdivia, Warhover said Choi's intentions are clear.

"The message is clear that the president is saying these are my boundaries," he said.

But Christian Basi, spokesman for Choi, said the president had other intentions.

"The chancellor wanted to encourage respectful conversation," he said.

One of the reasons Warhover thinks School of Journalism faculty are hesitant to voice an opinion is some faculty members are on contracts that run on a year by year basis. These professors do not have the safety of the tenured track.

"The perception is that this could come back to you in a real way," Warhover said.

KBIA also depends on the university. Famuliner explains that KBIA's license is owned by the University of Missouri System, similar to the other two-thirds of public radio stations in the U.S. Despite being owned by colleges or universities, it is standard practice for these newsrooms to remain editorially independent.

"In my 9 years at KBIA that has been the practice here as well, and I feel it necessary to assert the continuance of that practice of editorial independence," Famuliner said. "I believe, as do many other public radio stations and the universities that hold their licenses, that this separation serves the interests of both the newsroom and the University, and ultimately our community."

"I don't believe anybody is working here with a malicious intent, but I believe the way the president is giving his thoughts could be way better."

— Tom Warhover

“ My statements were interpreted by some as an attempt to silence voices, particularly when they were applied to those working in journalism. That is in no way my intent, and I take responsibility that my words did not deliver the message I intended.”

— Mun Choi

Warhover thinks Famuliner's statement is transparent and eye-opening.

"It was the rest of the story," he said.

Basi said that Choi understands the separation of the newsroom and the university.

"He respects the journalism industry and the news gathering process," he said. "There is an expectation of separation."

The journalism faculty letter also came days after Choi blocked University of Missouri students on his personal Twitter account. A majority of the students he blocked had criticized the university's health and safety measures with in-person classes resuming this fall.

Choi eventually unblocked the students once he came under more scrutiny and an alumnum threatened legal action.

Basi explains Choi's intentions for blocking the students.

"The president had been the target of profane and non-constructive tweets, and he did not feel like seeing that," he said. "He decided to reverse the blocking because he was trying to run the university with the pandemic and did not want the distraction."

In late July, Choi wrote an opinion column for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. In the column, Choi expands upon the university's commitment to free speech. The column came after Famuliner's post. Choi said:

"Soon after I came on board in March 2017, the UM System and the four universities approved the commitment to freedom of expression. In January 2020, I also established the Intellectual Pluralism and Freedom of Expression Task Force. I stated in the charge that, "in many ways, universities have been reactive when it is perceived that diverse views are unwelcome or free speech is curtailed. We want to be proactive to address these perceptions" to

establish new programs and training.

Personally, I have always been available to have discussions in person, by phone, Zoom or email with all members of our campus communities. During the past four months at Mizzou, there have been more meetings with faculty, staff, students, administrators, parents, legislators, alumni and community members on the important matters of budget, pandemic and race relations than in recent memory."

In response to the journalism faculty members' letter, Choi said:

"My statements were interpreted by some as an attempt to silence voices, particularly when they were applied to those working in journalism. That is in no way my intent, and I take responsibility that my words did not deliver the message I intended."

After former MU Chancellor, Alexander Cartwright, was selected as the new president of the University of Central Florida in March 2020, Choi stepped in to become interim chancellor. Choi has been the president of the University of Missouri System since 2017.

In July, the decision to merge the positions of chancellor and president was made, but not without opposition from the University of Missouri-Kansas City, the University of Missouri-St. Louis and the Missouri University of Science and Technology.

Faculty from the three universities sent a letter opposing the combination of the two positions to the Board of Curators, but the board still voted unanimously for the merger. Eight of the nine Board of Curators members are alumni of the University of Missouri-Columbia. The merger will save the University of Missouri System about \$500,000, compared to the \$3.5 billion

budget for fiscal year 2020.

On Friday, the chair of the Board of Curators put out a statement of support for Choi:

"The MU Faculty Council's censure of President Mun Choi approved by a small group of 12 members asserted that he showed a lack of care and thoroughness in tenure promotion and review. Nothing could be further from the truth," said Julia Brncic, chair of the Board of Curators.

"President Choi and Provost Latha Ramchand performed rigorous and comprehensive reviews of information provided by departmental committees, department chairs, college committees, deans and the campus committee. The Board stands behind the integrity of President Choi's reviews and is committed to upholding high academic standards to achieve excellence."

Warhover thinks it is fair for the Board of Curators to back Choi, but it sends a message.

"Choi's bosses are backing him and specifically reaching out to say that and to cast dispersion to those who are not backing him," he said.

In 2015, the University of Missouri's former president, Tim Wolfe, was forced to step down after mishandling civil rights protests intended to revive awareness of the struggle against racism and other forms of discrimination on MU's campus and around the country.

At the beginning of October, the University of Missouri Faculty Council on University Policy released a "We Remember" statement on the 2015 protests. It promises to ensure diversity, equity and inclusion on campus and within the state.



Burning of McIntosh at St. Louis, in April, 1836,

The broken heart of America: A review and fact-check

by Paul Wagman

In "The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States," Harvard University professor Walter Johnson has written a history of St. Louis that could not come at a more sensitive moment. Between its author's prestigious pedigree and its exquisite timing, the book is winning a large audience, including many well-intentioned St. Louisans eager to gain a better understanding of their city's often tragic history.

It is therefore all the more disappointing to report that the book cannot be considered reliable. It is, in fact, shockingly unreliable.

Broken Heart is in one sense valuable in spite of its defects. Given Americans' ignorance of their own history, and perhaps especially of their own communities' histories, almost any new survey of our past is welcome. And readers will learn a lot from this well-written book. How many people know, for example, that one of if not the first public lynching in America took place in downtown St. Louis in 1836? That for many years before the Civil War it was actually illegal for free blacks to emigrate and settle in St. Louis? That because of the presence here of Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis was essentially the headquarters for the Army's battles against the Native Americans and conquest of the West? And much, much more.

Yet Broken Heart has larger aspirations than a mere recounting of the awful things

that happened here. It argues for St. Louis's national significance. St. Louis, Johnson writes, has been "the city at the heart of American history.... the crucible of American history ... much of American history has unfolded from the juncture of empire and anti-Blackness in the city of St. Louis."

This is not to say St. Louis is "unique," Johnson said in an interview this past spring on St. Louis Public Radio. But "the history of the United States was made, was articulated, was best expressed and first expressed in St. Louis."

And St. Louis, he said in that interview, is "extreme" — a feature, he argues, that can be seen on both sides of the political dynamic. Although racism and the forces of capital have nearly always dominated, there have also been breathtaking moments of radicalism, he writes — sometimes even interracial radicalism, such as in 1877, when the first general strike in the nation's history united Black and white workers in what historians sometimes call the "St. Louis Commune."

Driving both extremes, Broken Heart contends, has been "racial capitalism: the intertwined supremacist ideology and the practices of empire, extraction, and exploitation. Dynamic, unstable, ever-changing, and world-making." The book is essentially a telling of St. Louis's history and its impact on the nation's history through the lens of racial capitalism.

Which leads us to ask, of course, whether

this lens gives us the clear picture we so desperately need, perhaps especially now.

Nicolas Lemann, in a review in The New Yorker, expresses a degree of skepticism. Broken Heart "demonstrates both the power of the model [of racial capitalism] and its limitations." The book works racial capitalism too hard, he argues, as an explanatory paradigm for the nation's and St. Louis's history.

Someone with Lemann's deep background in American history and historiography has the credentials to make such judgments. I do not. So I approached the book in the one way that's natural to a one-time reporter like myself: I fact-checked it.

What I found, to my mounting astonishment, was a litany of errors, omissions, and distortions. And because nearly all of these errors and distortions serve the same apparent purpose — to exaggerate, dramatize, over-simplify and villainize — one has to conclude that Broken Heart is at least as much polemic as it is history.

What follows is a discussion of some of the more egregious examples. Some are central to the thesis; some are not. But when it comes to error, as any reporter or lawyer knows, the smallest can erode trust as much as the largest. In any case, here is a partial accounting, with the topics presented generally in the order they appear in the book:

Slavery

"The deeper truth," Johnson writes, "is that slavery in St. Louis was uniquely precarious, and because it was uniquely precarious, it was uniquely violent."

Johnson makes several intriguing arguments to advance his case that slavery in St. Louis was uniquely precarious, but the more important part of this statement — the assertion that slavery was "uniquely violent" in St. Louis — is, of course, remarkable. That's because: 1) the word "unique" is so extraordinarily powerful and 2) making reliable comparisons in an area so difficult to measure as the violence of slavery is obviously nearly impossible. Yet Johnson seems to rest this extraordinary claim on only a few slim reeds: accounts by two or perhaps three women slaves of their own experiences and a memoir by William Wells Brown, an African American writer who wrote, "no part of our slaveholding country is more noted for the barbarity of its inhabitants than St. Louis."

J. Neal Primm, in his authoritative 1980 history of St. Louis, "Lion of the Valley," offers this contrasting assessment:

"The local tradition that slavery was comparatively mild in St. Louis was shared even by such moderate or strongly anti-slavery leaders as J.B. C. Lucas, Frank P. Blair, Jr., and William Greenleaf Eliot, who spoke of the humaneness of local masters and the general disapproval of 'unnecessary' cruelty."

Primm cites support for this "local tradition": "Manumissions [freeing of slaves by their owners] were more frequent in the city than in rural areas, especially by those who thought slavery was damaging the economy or who favored 'colonization,' or both. Blair, William P. Mason, and others of this persuasion freed their slaves in the 1850s, emancipation reaching a peak of 49 in 1860. ... Slave owners illegally helped or encouraged their chattels to learn to read and write; some bondmen were permitted to 'hire themselves out' so they could buy their freedom; and slaves were guaranteed trial by jury."

"Yet," Primm adds, "there were witnesses who scoffed at the vaunted benevolence of the system. William Wells Brown, an ex-slave, wrote that St. Louis was noted for its barbarity; and there were examples of extreme cruelty, such as hanging a woman slave by her thumbs while flogging her."

Primm's conclusion: "Even if the questionable premise that the institution was comparatively humane in St. Louis is accepted, the essential condition of slavery remained."

Abraham Lincoln

Consistent with his thesis that there is a through-line between the history of America's treatment of Native Americans and its treatment of Blacks, Johnson writes that Lincoln's "political roots had more to do with the Black Hawk War than they did with the Black freedom struggle, and his political base lay in the free-soil wing of the Republican Party: antislavery, white supremacist, imperialist and removalist."

"In short, Lincoln's 'ordered' executions actually represented his accedence to those executions and came in the context of a humane and politically courageous rejection of more executions."

In this connection, Johnson discusses an uprising by Dakotas in what is now Minnesota, after bureaucratic delays in paying the Indians after they had ceded most of their land left them desperate and near starvation. Hundreds of whites were killed. The U.S. Army went to war in response and eventually took a large number of Sioux as prisoners. A military tribunal then tried 392 for murder and sentenced 303 to death.

Here is how Johnson reports what happened next:

"On the day after Christmas in 1862, a week before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln ordered the simultaneous execution by hanging of thirty-eight Dakota men, in an exemplary act of retribution that remains the largest mass execution in the history of the United States (as well as a marked contrast from the emergent laws of war that governed the treatment of Confederate prisoners of war)."

Now here is Lincoln biographer and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner David Herbert Donald on this episode:

"As soon as the news [of the Indian trials] reached Washington, in mid-October, the President told Pope [the General in charge of military operations against the Dakotas] to stage no executions without his sanction. To gain further information ... he also sought the advice of Episcopal Bishop Henry B. Whipple, who advised 'a new policy of honesty was needed' for dealing with this 'wronged and neglected race.'"

In November, Pope warned Lincoln that if all 303 condemned by the tribunal to death were not executed, white Minnesotans would respond with an indiscriminate massacre of the Dakotas. But Lincoln "refused to be stampeded." He personally read the record of every single one of the 303 condemned men, ... seeking to identify those who had been guilty of the most atrocious crimes ... He came up with a list of thirty-nine names, which he carefully wrote out in his own hand: 'Te-he-hdo-ne-cha,' ... and so on. Wiring the list to the military authorities, he warned the telegraph operator to be particularly careful, since even a slight error might send the wrong man to his death.

"On December 26 the thirty-eight men (one more man was pardoned at the last minute) were executed — the largest public execution in American history. Few praised Lincoln for reducing the list of condemned men. On the contrary, his clemency lighted a brief firestorm of protest in Minnesota, ... [and] in [the election of] 1864, Republicans

lost strength in Minnesota. Senator (formerly Governor) Ramsey told the President that if he had hanged more Indians he would have had a larger majority. 'I could not afford to hang men for votes,' Lincoln replied."

In short, Lincoln's "ordered" executions actually represented his accedence to those executions and came in the context of a humane and politically courageous rejection of more executions.

Does this matter? Are these mere details? Didn't Lincoln still preside over a country that committed ethnic cleansing and a near-genocide against the Native Americans?

Yes, he did, and that part of our country's record — and Lincoln's part in it — can never and should never be whitewashed. But by omitting this part of the story, Johnson gives us, at the very least, a distorted picture of the 16th President. He leads us to think that Lincoln's vaunted humanity was nowhere to be found when it came to Native Americans.

Which was not so.

Ulysses S. Grant

Johnson offers the 18th President a drive-by sliming similar to the one he accords Lincoln.

Grant, he writes, "resigned from the Army in 1854 and returned to farm his wife's property (and oversee her family's slaves) in St. Louis County, south of the city. Grant was an indifferent farmer, and in 1860 he quit altogether and moved with his family to Galena, where his father had offered him a job and a regular income in his tannery."

Johnson is obviously justified in injecting a reference to Grant's management of his in-laws' slaves during this period, even though it's a little off-point: His main criticism of Grant relates to the "murderous fury" he later displayed in the Civil War. But given that Johnson raises the subject of Grant's relationship to slavery during his St. Louis years, one might expect a fuller account.

At some time during this period Grant acquired a slave, a fact Johnson doesn't mention although it works against the future 18th President. The likelihood is that Grant was given or purchased the man from his father-in-law. In any case, in 1859 — at a time of financial hardship for the Grant family, when the sale of his slave might have brought \$1,000, the equivalent of more than \$30,000 in today's dollars — Grant freed him.

Perhaps this is why Johnson doesn't mention the man in the first place; perhaps

Continued on next page



not. In any case, the real story is once again more complex than Johnson is interested in or willing to tell us.

Lincoln Steffens and St. Louis's Municipal Corruption

In 1902 and 1903, the great muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens published two articles in McClure's Magazine about the comprehensive corruption of St. Louis's government. The articles were part of a series by Steffens entitled "The Shame of the Cities," and dealing with Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and New York in addition to St. Louis.

One of the central characters in both of Steffens' St. Louis articles is Joseph W. Folk, the city's incorruptible and fearless circuit attorney, who almost single handedly pulled back the curtain on the city's corruption.

Johnson writes:

"Over the course of several years beginning in 1904, Folk investigated a rolling set of conspiracies between local businessmen, bankers, and political leaders to buy and fix virtually every matter that came before the St. Louis city council. ... The occasion for Folk's crusade was, as Steffens noted at the beginning of his first essay in McClure's, the city's bid to host the 1904 World's Fair ..."

"The Shame of the Cities" is still available

in print and can even be found online. It takes only a few keystrokes to learn that Johnson has misreported the facts.

Folk did not begin his investigations in 1904. He began, Steffens says, as soon as he took office, which was Jan. 1, 1901, according to Harper Barnes in his "Standing on a Volcano: The Life and Times of David Rowland Francis." Regardless, to suggest 1904 is absurd on its face, because Steffens' essays — which are all about Folk and his investigations — were published in 1902 and 1903.

Moreover, Steffens did not note at the beginning of his first essay in McClure's that Folk initiated his crusade in connection with the city's bid to host the World's Fair. Instead, Steffens (who actually only edited the piece; it was written by Charles H. Wetmore, a Post-Dispatch editor) made a cheeky reference to the Fair. Here is the lede:

"St. Louis, the fourth city in size in the United States, is making two announcements to the world: one, that it is the worst-governed city in the land; the other that it wishes all men to come there (for the World's Fair) and see it."

Throughout the essay there is no further reference to the Fair, and none of the scandals Folk investigates relate to "the city's bid to host the Fair."

Monsanto

One of the many targets of the anger Johnson flashes throughout his book is the St. Louis-based company now part of Germany's Bayer AG.

"Monsanto," he writes, "which began during World War I as a producer of the compounded precursors for high explosives, increased its profits a hundredfold before the war ended." Referring to the decades after World War II, he later adds: "Monsanto, headquartered in Creve Coeur, emerged as the world's largest chemical company in these years, producing, one after the other, some of the most notorious products in human history: DDT, Agent Orange, and Roundup, the herbicide whose effects are only now coming to light."

In fact, Monsanto was founded 16 years before the United States entered World War I, in 1901. (If one is inclined to give Johnson the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he knew that — the date, after all, is plastered all over the Internet and in printed sources — and was only trying to say that Monsanto entered the war years in the fashion he describes.)

In any case, the company's chief product was initially saccharin, soon followed by caffeine and vanillin, and shortly thereafter, aspirin. Henry Berger, the late Washington University history professor, recounts what

happened next in his “St. Louis and Empire: 250 Years of Imperial Quest & Urban Crisis”:

When the United States entered World War I, “The War Industries Board imposed rigid restrictions on the use of saccharin for nonmilitary purposes because a vital ingredient in manufacturing saccharin was needed for making munitions. Monsanto was able to make the necessary ingredient as well as other chemical components created for military purposes and benefited from America’s association with the Allies.”

That obviously puts the company’s early history in a different light. In addition, although Berger’s figures for Monsanto’s financial growth during the war are incomplete, the ones he does provide suggest that a 100-fold increase in profit is wildly exaggerated.

Finally, Monsanto was never “the world’s largest chemical company.” It was never even the biggest American chemical company. A check of the Fortune 500 rankings between 1955 and 2015 shows that DuPont was generally three to seven times larger in sales, and that Dow Chemical was at almost all times substantially bigger as well. In 2016, when Bayer announced it would buy Monsanto, its annual revenues were nearly four times larger. Monsanto, however, was the global leader in seeds, including genetically modified ones.

Legal segregation

Johnson brings up a notorious ordinance mandating housing segregation in St. Louis at two different points in his book.

In the first instance he writes: “The city also passed its first segregation ordinance at this time, in 1901, forbidding Black St. Louisans, by popular referendum, from establishing a residence on any block that was at least ‘seventy-five percent white.’”

Fifty-three pages later, he sets the date of the ordinance’s passage at Feb. 29, 1916.

The second date is correct. On that day, Johnson writes, “the city of St. Louis became the first in the nation to pass a residential segregation ordinance by popular referendum ...”

This is accurate. It can also mislead, however, because it lacks context. The fuller story can be found in both “Never Been a Time,” a history of the 1917 East St. Louis race riot by Harper Barnes, and in “St. Louis,” a 1977 work edited by Selwyn Troen and Glen E. Holt. In mandating housing segregation, Troen and Holt tell us, St. Louis was “Following the example of such border and southern cities as Baltimore, Atlanta and New Orleans.” Where St. Louis was first, they explain, was in the method by which it passed its ordinance. The vote in St. Louis “was the first issue to have been decided by the progressive reform innovation of the initiative-referendum method for passing local ordinances.” (This, the editors comment, was an irony.)

None of this, of course, gets St. Louis off the hook in this ugly matter, but it does weaken Johnson’s argument that “the history of the United States was made ... was first and best expressed ... in St. Louis.”

1969 Public Housing Rent Strike

In Johnson’s discussion of the strike against the St. Louis Housing Authority by tenants of St. Louis’s public housing projects, he writes: “The successful strike was almost entirely led by Black women. ... They were supported by virtually every Black activist organization in the city.”

The strike indeed was led by Black women, and they did win the support of St. Louis’s Black activist organizations. However, Ora Lee Malone — the only Black woman whom Johnson names in this account and whose photograph is included in this section — played a marginal role at best; Malone’s historical prominence lies in other labor-related struggles. The Black women who actually did lead the strike, including the late Jean King, the president of the Citywide Rent Strike Committee and the tenants’ most visible spokesperson, are not mentioned. Also omitted are the key roles played by two white men, Richard Baron, the Legal Services attorney who represented the tenants, and the late Harold Gibbons, a Teamsters Union leader here, who organized the Civic Alliance for Housing to forge a settlement.

The rent strike here had national impact. King testified before Congress. The Brooke Amendment — sponsored in the House of Representatives by St. Louis’s own William L. Clay Sr. — soon followed. It capped tenants’ rent obligations at 25 percent of their income and led in turn to federal subsidies for local Housing Authorities, to make up the difference. The strike here also led to the placement of public housing tenants on the Housing Authority board here, an innovation that was then repeated around the country.

Broken Heart, whose subject, once again, is the role of St. Louis in the nation’s racial history, mentions none of these impacts.

Charles “Cookie” Thornton and the Kirkwood City Council Massacre

On Feb. 7, 2008, Charles “Cookie” Thornton, an African-American resident of Meacham Park, an African-American neighborhood annexed by Kirkwood in 1991, shot and killed a Kirkwood police officer guarding City Hall before entering the building where a city council meeting was in session. He then shot and killed another police officer, two city council members and the city’s public works director, and shot the Mayor, who later died from complications related to his wounds in conjunction with cancer treatments. Police arriving on the scene shot and killed Thornton.

Thornton was a well-known figure in Kirkwood and Meacham Park and for many years a widely popular one. Broken Heart portrays him as a man driven to extremes by the betrayal of Kirkwood city officials, who harassed him by ticketing him for parking his dump truck on his lawn and similar infractions. By 2008, Johnson writes, Thornton “owed almost \$20,000 — a total that is hard to understand as anything other than a massively disproportionate and punitive response to Thornton’s claim (albeit a stubborn one) of a long-standing customary right to do business in the way that he always had.”

Thornton also felt betrayed by the city for another reason, Johnson writes. He had expected to be awarded demolition contracts by the city in connection with a mall development project in Meacham Park that he had long actively supported. “Virtually everyone in Meacham Park thought that Thornton had been promised work on the project in return for his support, including Thornton himself,” Johnson writes.

But in the end, Thornton won no business on the project. He had lost out, Johnson writes, “in a decision that came down to dollars and cents in the pockets of people who cared more about calculating the bottom line than taking the high road. It was then that Thornton began to ... descend into the dark cycle of feelings of humiliation, betrayal, anger and fear that led him to the city council chambers on that February night in 2008.”

Thornton’s perceived betrayal, Johnson writes, took place in the context of a larger betrayal by the city of Kirkwood, related to the redevelopment project. The promises the city made about it, Johnson writes, “turned out to be hogwash — or, if not hogwash, a sort of diluted runoff that still smelled like hogwash. ... In the end, the mall project destroyed more than half of Meacham Park ... A promised eighty-five new houses became six.”

Johnson refers approvingly to the “sensitivity” shown in a St. Louis Magazine report on the tragedy. He doesn’t mention, however, some crucial facts in that report. Most glaringly, as early as 2002, Kirkwood offered complete forgiveness of Thornton’s fines in return for his agreement to stop violating the law. Thornton, however, refused, saying he wanted a public apology from the city. Then former Kirkwood High School principal Franklin McCallie, a friend of Thornton’s, interceded to try to resolve the matter, but “Thornton kept saying ‘No, no, no!’” McCallie later recalled. After four months of futility, McCallie gave up. The city then made yet another attempt to work it out with Thornton, but that too ended in failure.

A 2010 report published originally by the St. Louis Beacon provides other pertinent facts related to the city’s alleged betrayal of Thornton in connection with demolition contracts for the redevelopment project. Thornton didn’t just want some of the demolition work, the report says, he wanted all of it. But Thornton didn’t have the capacity to do all of the work, Kirkwood officials said, and wouldn’t even bid to get contracts. The Kirkwood officials are identified by name in this report and include several African Americans. (Disclosure: William Freivogel, publisher of the GJR, was part of the reporting team that wrote that article.)

In regard to the alleged betrayal of Meacham Park, the Beacon article notes that the redevelopment project remains controversial. But it also cites a number of benefits, including \$4 million of TIF (tax increment financing) money spent on housing improvements in Meacham Park, \$40,000 premiums for displaced homeowners over the St. Louis County appraised value of their homes, and a new park.

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None of this can be found in Broken Heart.

Michael Brown

Johnson repeatedly refers to the 2014 killing of 18-year old Ferguson resident Michael Brown as a “murder.” In one reference it is an “unpunished murder.” In the book’s index it is an “execution.” Here is how he tells the story:

“... Officer Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown, who had been walking down the middle of a street near his grandmother’s house. After a short scuffle in the street, Brown ran away. When Wilson shot him, several witnesses later asserted, Brown had his hands raised in the air. Wilson later claimed that Brown, whom he had already shot at least once, had turned around and run toward the officer, even as Wilson kept shooting.”

Many readers will find Johnson’s terminology justified, in spite of two investigations — first by the U.S. Department of Justice, and more recently (and subsequent to the Broken Heart’s publication) by the office of St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney Wesley Bell—that failed to lead to charges of murder or any other crime. After all, at the very least, more competent police work might have averted the physical confrontation that ended in shots fired. And there is plenty of reason to believe that racial animus played a role in how the entire tragedy unfolded. (Johnson’s linkage of the story to the tax structure in Ferguson and the St. Louis region — a major theme of this part of his book — is also provocative and praiseworthy.)

But Wilson did allow a physical confrontation to happen, and Johnson’s telling of the story is highly selective. The DOJ report described something far more serious than a “scuffle.” The report supported the officer’s contention that Brown attempted to reach inside his vehicle and grab his gun; indeed, it found “conclusive evidence that Brown’s DNA was on Wilson’s gun.” It also found that Brown struck Wilson in the face, was wounded by a gunshot inside the car, fled 180 feet, suffered no wounds in the back and then moved back at Wilson immediately before the fatal shots.

The DOJ — Eric Holder’s and Barack Obama’s DOJ, it should be noted — also concluded that Brown didn’t cry out “Don’t shoot” and that, if he had his hands up, it was only for a moment before he began moving back toward Wilson. The DOJ said many of the witnesses who told the “Hands up, don’t shoot!” story had repeated what they had heard from neighbors or on the news. Some witnesses admitted they made up stories so they could be part of a big event in their community. The DOJ said the forensic evidence lined up with Wilson’s account and “Multiple credible witnesses corroborate virtually every material aspect of Wilson’s account and are consistent with the physical evidence.”

None of this is in Johnson’s narrative. He dismisses it all in a footnote, as follows:

“The separate DOJ report on the murder of Michael Brown, on the other hand, is, at best, a legalistic restatement of the extraordinary

latitude provided police officers who shoot unarmed people in the U.S. and, at worst, a complete misunderstanding of the full set of circumstances surrounding the shooting.”

Again, he has a point about the constraints around the DOJ’s (and Bell’s) investigations. But if he is going to present one version of the actual events — the part about what some eyewitnesses initially reported — then it is not too much to ask that he report what the DOJ later said about the credibility of those witnesses and the contrasting information obtained from others.

Jason Stockley

Discussing the downtown protests in 2017 over the acquittal of former St. Louis police officer Jason Stockley, Johnson takes aim at then acting St. Louis Police Chief Lawrence O’Toole. With entirely warranted indignation, he reports on the police department’s brutal treatment of the protesters and O’Toole’s obnoxious comments about it. (“... the police owned tonight,” he declared.)

Johnson then adds this parenthetical sentence: “(O’Toole was a finalist for permanent appointment at the end of 2017 but was not hired.)”

He makes no reference to who was hired: John W. Hayden, who is African American, and whose appointment drew near-universal praise at the time.

Kim Gardner and Wesley Bell or, More Precisely, the Absence of Kim Gardner and Wesley Bell

Two of the more significant political upheavals in the St. Louis area in recent years were the elections of Kim Gardner as St. Louis Circuit Attorney and of Wesley Bell as St. Louis County Prosecuting Attorney. Both are Black and both have instituted changes in the way the justice system relates to St. Louis’ Black community.

Bell’s election was especially shocking — a stunning upset of the longtime incumbent, Robert McCulloch, whose handling of the Michael Brown case had been widely seen as biased in favor of Officer Wilson. Broken Heart is unsparing of McCulloch in this matter. Johnson writes: “The refusal ... of District Attorney [sic] Robert McCulloch ... to allow the case against Wilson to go to trial presented the nation with a lurid example of St. Louis-style police impunity.”

Fair enough. What’s strange is the absence of any mention of what came next: the voters’ decision to boot McCulloch in favor of his outspoken critic. Likewise, Gardner’s name is nowhere to be found in Broken Heart. Yet both of these elections (Gardner first in 2016, Bell in 2018) came in time for inclusion in this book, as Johnson acknowledged in his St. Louis Public Radio interview.

The elections of Gardner and Bell might have found their way into the hopeful conclusion Johnson gives his book. Instead, he builds that conclusion on descriptions of various community-improvement efforts by people he himself refers to as “marginal and radical.” Beneath the surface, he writes, “these

ordinary people are doing something beautiful and profound.” In the book’s very last sentence, he paints an image of Black children being trained as runners by a woman whose own son was shot to death by a police officer in 2017. “They fly around the track in the fading light, little kids taking impossibly long strides.”

Poetic, for sure. And a case can certainly be made for including such descriptions in the book’s conclusion. But how can these images be allowed to crowd out any mention of the very *nonmarginal* political shocks represented by the elections of Bell and Gardner? Why aren’t we offered the meat with the meringue?

A Final Word

The basic building blocks of the story Johnson tells are obviously true: Americans did all but exterminate Native Americans; whites have practiced hideous racism toward Blacks from St. Louis’s earliest days; our racist history is built into the fabric, the structure, of our community; and that history continues to unfold. As he writes: “Whether one focuses on tax abatements justified by the inclusion of tranches of Black neighborhoods in the districts drawn on a map, the poverty parasitism of the payday loan industry, the for-profit policing of the segregated cities structured by St. Louis’s past, or the political economy of mass incarceration, the recent economic history of the city provides a series of examples of how to extract wealth from people who have already been pushed to the precarious margin of survival.”

But Johnson’s storytelling is selective, tendentious; for whatever reason, facts that don’t fit his narrative don’t find their way into the story. And at times he’s downright sloppy. The combination destroys the reader’s faith that he is offering us the accurate and nuanced accounting we need.

Trying to explain these flaws would involve speculation, which is always hazardous and usually ill-advised. But perhaps in this case speculation isn’t necessary. Johnson himself seems to offer us an explanation.

In his St. Louis Public Radio interview, the author acknowledged, “A lot of my rhetoric is pretty hot, and I feel pretty hot about a lot of things.”

He is a native of Columbia, Missouri, Johnson tells us in Broken Heart’s prologue, and he has visited St. Louis “countless times” throughout his life.

“I came to this book less as a professional historian,” he writes, “than as a citizen taking the measure of a history that I had lived though but not yet fully understood. This is a history that I have resisted, but also a history from which I have benefited, as a white man and a Missourian.”

A zealous attachment to his theory of the case (racial capitalism) as the key to American history, a justified righteous indignation about our nation’s history and misgivings over his own background may have gotten the better of this historian’s professional discipline. Too bad for all of us.



Ethel Shelley reading the front page of the St. Louis Post Dispatch.

The broken heart of America: A response to Walter Johnson

by Paul Wagman

During a webinar about his book sponsored by Washington University Oct. 1, Walter Johnson, the Harvard professor who wrote *Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States*, was asked by William Freivogel, publisher of the *Gateway Journalism Review*, to comment on the foregoing review, which GJR published online in September. Johnson's response was witheringly dismissive.

"Honestly, I'm not particularly inclined to engage that," Johnson said. Although the review did identify "some empirical errors ... that can be quite easily fixed in the paperback," it lacked "integrity as an intellectual engagement."

Specifically, Johnson said, the piece created "some innuendo ... that I am unsympathetic to the well-intended efforts of white people like Abraham Lincoln or like the city of Kirkwood, which said that after

they had fined Cookie Thornton \$20,000 for picayune traffic tickets and what you might call created offenses, that if he would not talk, if he would not critique the city of Kirkwood, which is to say that if he would give up his Constitutional right to free speech, they would generously forgive him the fines."

The review also revealed "a tone of paternalism," Johnson said, because it suggested "that maybe we shouldn't accept the testimony of people like William Wells Brown or Lucy Delaney — slave people in St. Louis — that slavery in St. Louis was particularly bad. ... because local tradition in St. Louis has it that St. Louis was very mild. And I want to say, whose tradition?"

"It just didn't seem to me to be particularly intellectually compelling and I think I've ... already said more about it than it actually deserves," he concluded.

To respond to these comments in an order slightly different from that in which they were made:

Charles "Cookie" Thornton and the city of Kirkwood

Johnson's latest comments only buttress the impression he created in *Broken Heart* that Thornton was some sort of righteous martyr, a man who "went to war," in the words of Thornton's brother, against the injustices inflicted on him by the city's persecution. The reality, as depicted in the reporting in *St. Louis Magazine* that Johnson himself cites admiringly, is less romantic.

Thornton simply ignored the city's parking and trash dumping and other ordinances for years — "Cookie was wrong all the time," in the words of one Meacham

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“Johnson’s mistake may seem minor, Germani wrote to me in an email whose use here she approved, but it fits into a pattern of small – yet cumulatively damaging – erasures of facts about their experience that the Shelley family has unfortunately encountered for decades. She documented that experience through family oral history and published accounts from the time of their landmark case.”

Park resident. For years he made robust use of his First Amendment rights, including at city council meetings, where “he brayed and heehawed to illustrate his claim that Mayor Mike Swoboda was a jackass.” To such behavior, the council responded in this way: “Determined to remain polite, they set up a blue velvet rope and egg timer, controlling Cookie as best they could. [Then] In 2006 he started letting his body go limp at meetings so that he’d have to be removed.”

What Thornton really wanted, St. Louis Magazine reported, was for the city to publicly state that it had intentionally wronged him and pay him heaps of money – sometimes, he said, \$1 million, sometimes \$5 million, sometimes \$25 million. After rejecting the city’s offer to forgive all the fines – 100 percent – if he would just stop defying its ordinances, Thornton exercised more of his Constitutional rights. He sued Kirkwood – first in St. Louis County Court, where he lost twice, the second time on appeal, and then in federal court, where he lost again. A week after the federal court loss he committed the Kirkwood city hall massacre.

Johnson, it should be noted, doesn’t dismiss or argue away the information in the foregoing two paragraphs. He simply omits almost all of it. He then accuses this reviewer of “innuendo” for suggesting he should have at least mentioned it.

Slavery

Johnson distorts what the review said.

Contrary to what he said in the Webinar, the review did not argue “that maybe we shouldn’t accept the testimony of people like William Wells Brown or Lucy Delaney – enslaved people in St. Louis – that slavery in St. Louis was particularly bad. ... because local tradition in St. Louis has it that St. Louis was very mild.”

Instead, the review made two other points.

First, it questioned how Johnson could

possibly assert, as he does on page 91 of *Broken Heart*, that slavery was “uniquely violent” in St. Louis. It questioned how anyone could make a statement of that nature with such confidence, given that slavery marked the lives of millions of people and stretched across thousands of square miles for more than two centuries.

Second, it contended that Johnson should not have simply ignored testimonies to the contrary – testimonies that slavery in St. Louis was actually relatively mild – especially given that there is data to back them up. The review noted with implicit approval that J. Neal Primm, in his authoritative history of St. Louis, *Lion of the Valley*, had presented evidence on both sides of this issue before reaching a conclusion.

So who exactly is being “paternalistic”? The critic who asks that readers be informed of conflicting points of view, and then provided with a measured judgment? Or Johnson – who picks only the information that fits his narrative and keeps his readers in the dark about the rest?

“Some empirical errors”

Perhaps only someone with the security of a tenured professorship could so blithely dismiss the kinds of errors the review identified. “Empirical errors” is one description; “whoppers” might be another, especially for those, such as when Monsanto was founded, that Google can find in a microsecond. And the point in identifying them was not only to set the record straight, but also to suggest that perhaps in writing *Broken Heart*, Johnson put his narrative before the facts, and that, as well, the process of putting this book together might have had some holes.

In any event, given Johnson’s pronounced willingness to correct the errors identified in the GJR piece, perhaps he would like to learn of two more that other readers have brought to my attention since the piece was originally published. They are not whoppers, but they

may be of interest to people with a deep curiosity about St. Louis.

Shelley vs. Kraemer

In one of the most famous race-related cases ever to come out of St. Louis, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1948 that restrictive covenants mandating racial housing segregation could not be legally enforced. The ruling was a victory for the family of J.D. and Ethel Shelley, a Black couple who had purchased a home at 4600 Labadie Avenue in 1945 but had then been sued by a white couple living on the block, Louis and Fern Kraemer, for ignoring the covenant.

In Johnson’s account, the court victory enabled the Shelleys to move in at last to the property they had bought three years earlier. “Having felled one of the principal legal supports of residential segregation, the Shelleys were able to move into the house on Labadie,” Johnson writes.

In fact, however, the Shelleys had already been living in the house on Labadie for three years when the Court ruled in their favor. So I learned from Clara Germani, a senior editor at the *Christian Science Monitor* who published a narrative history of the Shelley family in 2019 for her Washington University master’s thesis in American Culture Studies.

Johnson’s mistake may seem minor, Germani wrote to me in an email whose use here she approved, but it fits into a pattern of small – yet cumulatively damaging – erasures of facts about their experience that the Shelley family has unfortunately encountered for decades. She documented that experience through family oral history and published accounts from the time of their landmark case.

“An important part of the Shelley story is what they endured during the time their case went through three courts,” she wrote me. “They indeed bought and moved into the house – unaware of a covenant that was quite obscured in the city records – and they suffered more than three years of abuse

from their community, including graffiti on their home, bricks thrown through windows, and some great worry about their kids walking in the neighborhood (which, in fact, was not all white – but mixed, racially)."

Again, the fact that the Shelleys were in the house all this time by no means qualifies as a major error. Nor can Johnson be faulted for not knowing about a master's thesis published only about a year before his book. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that it takes only a few minutes of research in primary sources to get the story straight. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch archives – available online – contain a photograph of Mrs. Shelley reading the front-page story about her and her husband's Supreme Court victory in the May 4, 1948 paper. Mrs. Shelley is shown in an armchair in what appears to be her living room. The newspaper gives her address as "4600 Labadie."

That same day, the St. Louis Star-Times was, if anything, more explicit. The last sentence of its front-page story read: "The Shelleys lived at the Labadie ave. address throughout the litigation."

Gateway Arch

When the ground to build the Gateway Arch was cleared in 1939, Johnson says, "Two hundred apartment buildings and houses were among the four hundred or so buildings that were torn down ..., almost all of them occupied by renters, many of them Black. So, too, the cluster of bars, coffeehouses, and squats that had once been known as the 'Greenwich Village of the West,' the places where the poets and the radicals had met and conspired during the years of the Depression. It was almost as if Mayor Dickmann were revenging himself upon on [sic] the Black-communist-bohemian alliance that had so often demonstrated outside (and sometimes inside) his office in the 1930s."

Robert J. Moore Jr. is the retired historian of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial and author of a history of the Arch, "Gateway Arch: An Architectural Dream."

I asked him about the foregoing passage. He gave me permission to quote his reply, through email, as follows:

"I would say that there most certainly were Black renters living on the Arch grounds," he wrote. "But all evidence points to the fact that it was a mixed-race area of the city, as it had been going all the way back to Colonial times. Existing evidence does not support the notion that the district was an African American enclave."

"Historians," Moore continued, "seem to be trying to say these days that the area was a place where people could get cheap apartments and so a lot of poor people were living there with nowhere else to go. That wasn't true, according to the city directories from the period – nearly every person listed had a profession and they seemed to be working class people, not poor or needy people."

"I would add that the population of the district was in decline throughout the 1930s. In the beginning of the '30s there was still a school at the Old Cathedral, but it closed in 1934 for lack of pupils. My research showed that by 1937 the population of the Arch grounds was just 168, and that includes the priests at the Old Cathedral, the Bohemians in Little Bohemia, and that mix of working-class people I mentioned earlier. I'm not sure how many people were forced out by 1939 due to the memorial, but I would say 168 at most."

Moore had no comment on Johnson's statement that it was "almost as if Mayor Dickmann were revenging himself" on the "Black-community-bohemian alliance" that had bedeviled him. But I will offer one myself.

In that sentence we see snark (the accusation of vindictiveness) built on a hypothesis ("almost as if") about a defenseless dead man that is itself built on what Moore is saying is an exaggeration, at least as it concerns the Black population of the Arch grounds.

This is the kind of writing that further inclines one to view Broken Heart as polemic

as much as history.

Lacking "integrity as an intellectual engagement"

I'm not sure of Johnson's meaning here, but perhaps he was saying the GJR piece doesn't address his overarching points about racial capitalism driving the history of St. Louis from the beginning – that the review nips at the edges of his book without fully engaging its themes.

If that is the meaning, I would answer as follows:

In the original piece, and here again, I stipulate it is undeniable that racism has poisoned the history of the United States from the beginning, and that St. Louis has played a key role in that history. In criticizing Johnson's book, I am in no way seeking to apologize for or whitewash our tragic local history.

I also said that I am not a scholar but a former reporter, so I approached the book as a journalist and fact-checker. Journalists are taught that errors, whether large or small, are lethal to credibility. They are taught that even a small mistake indicates a lack of care or understanding that can reflect on their overall effort. And journalists, after all, are only writing "the first draft of history." Broken Heart is many, many drafts down that road.

Journalists are also taught that although no one is fully objective, they have an obligation to represent more than their own point of view and not to present only the information that fits their own belief system.

This isn't to say that journalists and historians don't have a right to adopt a point of view. They obviously do, and that's what news analysis and commentary are for in journalism, and what informs great works of history.

But persuasion does not reside in simply asserting a point of view and omitting inconvenient information. Persuasion arises from giving a full picture and then making a strong argument for a particular point of view. In this regard too, Broken Heart is a disappointment.

“ ... I stipulate it is undeniable that racism has poisoned the history of the United States from the beginning, and that St. Louis has played a key role in that history. In criticizing Johnson's book, I am in no way seeking to apologize for or whitewash our tragic local history.”

Journalists urge re-examination of hate group coverage

by Christopher Heimerman

Even before the tidal wave of civil rights protests and upheaval from counter-protests, hate groups were rising fast in America.

The wide-open wounds inflicted by 2020 have set up a moment of reckoning for journalists: How do you cover an incendiary group that thrives in both the darkness and in the spotlight?

"Obviously, we can't afford to ignore hate," said Ron Smith, whose legacy has led him to his role as editor of the nonprofit Neighborhood News Service in Milwaukee. "It's journalism 101. We don't have to amplify voices of hate. But we'd not be responsible if we did not talk about hate groups."

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of hate groups in America eclipsed 1,000 in February 2019, and were up 30 percent midway through Donald Trump's presidency. SPLC reported that hate groups have more than doubled since it tracked 457 groups in 1999. The nonprofit watchdog this past March put out a warning that white supremacist groups had increased by 55 percent during the Trump era.

A newsroom's audience needs to know what hate groups are out there, what they're doing, and what threat they pose. It's on reporters and their editors to determine where to draw the line between the public's need to know and context and quotes that amplify messages of hate or blatant falsehoods.

"You don't want to give them free publicity and recruiting tools," said Daxton "Chip" Stewart, a professor at Texas Christian University, whose courses include ethics and law of mass communication. "Attention legitimizes them."

The SPLC curates an interactive Hate Map, where users can do deep dives into the recent history of hate groups in America, with year-over-year data and filters to pin down specific ideologies.

Smith said the First Amendment needs not be applied when it comes to hate groups.

"We can't fall victim to



Ron Smith

'fairness' where we get the other side. There's no other side in hate," Smith said. "I don't feel a need to get a voice when someone's saying something derogatory about a racial group."

NNS covers 18 underserved communities in Milwaukee, one of the most segregated cities in the nation, and is housed at Smith's alma mater, Marquette University — where he was the first Black editor of the Marquette Tribune. Smith worked 14 years as deputy editor at the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, less than a mile from campus, before moving to Washington, D.C. in 2016 and serving as managing editor for USA Today until he joined NNS in February 2019.

He said whether you're working for a massive news chain or a small, scrappy nonprofit like NNS, you must consider, and be somewhat wary of, your entire audience.

"There are people who are going to be listening. A hate group might have a publication or social media that we don't know about," he said. "We can't ignore that, but we're not stenographers. We're under no obligation to tell things verbatim. We don't have to replicate the hatred they're talking about, but we have to think about how they impact life in America."

On conspiracy theorists: 'Why would we give any credence to that group?'

Mark Zoromski is the director of media for



Daxton "Chip" Stewart

Marquette's Diederich College of Communication. He commended Gateway for examining the issue of covering hate groups.

"It's kind of an interesting paradigm," Zoromski said. "Hate groups thrive on media attention and publicity. At the same time, hate groups thrive in the shadows."

So it's on journalists to tell the audience what the group is — as in, exactly what it is.

"Journalists need to call it what it is," Zoromski said. "If it's a racist group, you have to call it a racist group."

His ethics policy for student journalists includes sections on covering diversity and hate speech, it doesn't have a section dedicated to hate groups — not yet, at least.

"I think that's something we need to take a good look at," he said.

Zoromski said reporters and editors must carefully explain what the group is doing, without propagating the mission — let alone seeking soundbites.

"If we're doing a story on the Holocaust, we won't get reaction from Holocaust deniers," Zoromski said.

Careful vetting and decision-making on when to publish a group's point of view is hardly limited to issues of race.

One particular group of deniers that cuts to Zoromski's core are those who promote alternative narratives for the Sandy Hook shooting. Zoromski's 16-year-old daughter, Kate, died in a car crash in November 2007, so he



Matthew Hall

empathizes with parents who will always grieve the children they lost in the shooting. And he seethes whenever conspiracy theorists are given a mouthpiece.

"Why would we even give any credence to that group and do a story about it?" he said. "We all know no person can be perfectly objective. We all approach things based on our experiences. My experience with the intense, life-altering grief of losing a 16-year-old child, I react very negatively when I hear about this group that claims Sandy Hook didn't happen. We have long said in order to achieve balance, we need to get all sides to the story. There are times when those sides are so fringe and hateful that they don't deserve journalistic attention."

Stewart said he's been challenging generations-old norms through which a journalist would tell a racist's side of the story under the guise of objectivity. He cited a particularly cringe-worthy report out of Utah in which an 8-year-old boy was quoted saying COVID-19 is no worse than the flu.

"Why are you giving an 8-year-old saying crazy stuff air-time?" he said. "As practice, it's good to talk to everybody, and it's important to go out and report on these events for background and context."

But call a spade a spade, he said.

"If there's a racist march, don't call it a freedom rally," he said. "It's a pseudo-event

drawing news coverage, and it worked. It's on us as journalists not to be played."

He said the 13 men charged in connection with the plot to abduct Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer should be called domestic terrorists, rather than a militia.

"Call them what they are," he said. "It's not bias. Even though they perceive the term to be derogatory, it's accurate. Call it out for what it is."

The editor-reporter relationship

With newsrooms being gashed by brutal economic realities, discussions between editors and reporters remain paramount in coverage of sensitive issues.

"Communication is one of my biggest points in running a newsroom," said Romando Dixon, who's 3 months into his tenure as the first Black editor of the Peoria Journal-Star. "That discussion leads to decisions big and small, whether it be how much background we'll use, which quotes, and which photos. There's such a gray area with everything in the business."

Joe Davidson, the Washington Post's federal government issues columnist who, along with 43 others co-founded the National Association of Black Journalists nearly 50 years ago, spoke of the importance of coaching over simply editing and line-editing when it comes to covering events such as a protest.

"It begins at the story assignment, having a conversation about what to look for and how to frame a story without putting a reporter in a straightjacket,"

he said. "Throughout the editing process, the line-editing process, those discussions continue. Once the story is published, the conversation can continue with a look toward the next story."

It's equally on the editor to evaluate the story's context, and often add to what the reporter has put in the story, in order to reach and report the truth.

"What we try to get at is the truth, not just saying this person said A and somebody else said Z, and that there's nothing in between A and Z," he said. "That would lack responsibility in journalism. Everything in between is part of the context, and good reporters have to be aware and do their research and talk to a variety of people, to make sure they're not giving equal weight to A and Z."

Dixon said it's also important to check with reporters before they leave the office if there's a potential concern over the topic they're covering.

"Is it a safe environment for your reporter, and can they cover an event in an unbiased manner?" he said. "Then you have to be able to adjust accordingly."

"Black reporters deal with this every day — how do you cover somebody who hates you?" Smith said.

A moment of reckoning starts with leadership

It's up to each newsroom to re-examine the line between the public's need to know and reckless journalism that exacerbates societal issues.

"But I think you're seeing a lot more professional organizations in journalism

pushing back on this," Stewart said. "They've done a lot of rethinking about journalism norms and what they should be."

Matthew Hall, editorial and opinion director at The San Diego Union-Tribune and president of the national Society of Professional Journalists, said his newsroom is re-evaluating policy and best practices, but he's unsure exactly how many others are in the nation.

"I hope it's happening, especially in this moment. It may be that we're ahead of the curve, but I'd suggest that all outlets and all journalists do it," he said. "There's no space for hate speech in society. Racism is racism. That's not a pro-con idea."

He said newsrooms also need to be examining the diversity of their staff, a process the Union-Tribune took on this year. It's publishing its demographic data, and Hall said part of SPJ's strategic plan is to get newsrooms to share their demographic breakdown, too.

"This is a moment when all outlets are looking internally at these issues," Hall said. "Your coverage of the community needs to be reflective of your staff."

Minorities make up about a quarter of the American population, yet only about one-eighth of newsrooms coast to coast, according to data collected by the American Society of News Editors beginning in 1978, when the group set a goal of newsrooms' diversity reflecting that of the American population by 2025.

Initial gains were encouraging. In 2006, minorities made up nearly 14 percent of newsroom staff, three and a

half times more than in 1978 (less than 4 percent). But progress flatlined.

"It's 2020," Smith said. "Some of the things we're talking about today, we've been talking about it for years. Talk is cheap. I don't want to hear talk anymore. I believe that who we hire and how we hire reflects the systemic biases we're seeing in society."

Last year, the ASNE and Associated Press Media Editors merged to form News Leaders of America. When only 17 percent of newsrooms responded to its survey in 2018, it paused the initiative to re-rack the survey and how it's distributed.

Smith said shifting those percentages is only part of needed reform.

"It's not enough to hire diversity," Smith said. "If you want that type of diversity, you can't just hire those people and then not listen."

Stewart said any outlet worth its salt needs to re-examine its management and its editorial board.

"People on the editorial board, and who have access to it, are by and large privileged," Stewart said. "They're affluent. They have money."

"People would come down from their ivory tower and say, 'Here's the news,'" Hall added.

"I think there's optimism and room for things to change," Stewart said. "But that's tampered by the actual power of people to make decisions, who are still entrenched in 1970s values."

Smith is optimistic because where some see dismantling, he sees a rebuilding project.

"With disruption and change comes opportunity," he said.

“ That discussion leads to decisions big and small, whether it be how much background we'll use, which quotes, and which photos.”

— Romando Dixon

Covering the LGBTQ community, and its haters

by Christopher Heimerman

Adam Rhodes, the social justice reporter for the Reader, said the importance of re-examining how we cover anti-LGBTQ groups is matched by a reckoning with how we cover the gay community.

"The media industry has just started to give a shit about trans people," he said. "We've been trained to not care about them."

The Southern Poverty Law Center tracked 70 anti-LGBTQ groups in 2019 — a startling 43 percent increase year-over-year. The nonprofit group didn't shy away from pointing blame at the Trump administration.

"The Trump administration has demonstrated a clear willingness to embrace their leaders and their policy agenda," the SPLC stated in its 2019 annual report, "The Year in Hate and Extremism".

Rhodes said it's the media's responsibility to connect the dots that way, and to plainly describe hate groups as what they are.

"Media, for whatever reason, has failed to really call a spade a spade, especially when human rights are being implicated," he said. "There's a side where someone has human rights, and a side where it doesn't."

That said, we need to cover hate groups, Rhodes said. The public needs to know about them, and the threat they pose.

"We need to be covering the issue of extremism and hate groups," he said. "But they need to be prepared to label things as extremism when it's extremism. The media has dropped the ball to say the least."

'I've been gaslighted my entire career'

Rhodes, 27, said he's "spoiled" to work for the Reader, a liberal, alternative weekly publication that's noted for its literary style of journalism. Thanks to a grant from the Field Foundation, Rhodes was brought on for a year as the Reader's first social justice reporter.

He earned a master's degree from Northwestern University's prestigious Medill School of Journalism, with a focus on social justice and investigative



Adam Rhodes

journalism.

Rhodes has worked in more traditional newsrooms, where pitching human rights-focused stories was like pushing sand up a hill.

"Throughout my career, there have been times I've pitched articles that related to a small population of people being mistreated, or a greatly underreported issue an editor didn't know about, and I'd need to convince [the editor] she's not a racist before I could even make any headway," Rhodes said.

He said when he pitched a story on babies born intersex and receiving cosmetic genital surgeries that effectively chose which gender they'd be, he was told it was too niche of an issue.

Then he told the editor 1.7% of American babies are born different from what's considered a typical boy or a girl, prompting surgeries to "normalize" them.

"When [the editor] heard that number, then it was a good enough story — not because we were talking about surgeries being performed on babies," Rhodes said. "Those surgeries have immense consequences for these people."

In July, Chicago's very own Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital was the first hospital in the nation to apologize for performing such surgeries, calling the approach "harmful and wrong."

"I don't have to convince Karen that



Genelle Belmas

these issues are issues," Rhodes said of Karen Hawkins, the Reader's co-editor-in-chief. "Karen has that trust in me. It's a little maddening to learn I've been gaslighted my entire career."

He struggled to come up with the best advice for a journalist in a more traditional newsroom.

"It's a mix of needing to hang with it and needing to find the right editor," he said. "There are some publications and some editors that, no matter how much background and digging you give them, it's going to go over their head."

He said it's bittersweet to see media outlets winning awards when they do elect to cover those issues.

"Unfortunately, that's sometimes how these organizations are convinced to cover marginalized groups," Rhodes said.

"If we investigate wrongdoings toward marginalized communities, we'll get a prize."

Yet despite potential acknowledgment from their peers, leadership is often hesitant to take on such issues, Rhodes said.

"For whatever reason, that doesn't translate to media owners giving more weight to that coverage," he said.

"They're afraid of the white people in their lives not buying newspapers and ads anymore."

“ The media hasn’t even touched the surface of how queer issues need to be covered. It doesn’t see significant problems. It sees us as identities, and not people.”

— Adam Rhodes

Check your stylebook

NLGJA: The Association of LGBTQ Journalists states in its stylebook that while Journalism 101 teaches us to report both sides of issues, “there are times when ‘balance’ doesn’t further understanding of the issues or the story.” The association advises reporters to get multiple perspectives. It recommends developing and using experts qualified to speak on subject matter, and then citing their expertise.

It urges that reporters be wary of sources’ bias and framing, and to apply the principle of First Do No Harm.

“Someone’s position might be biased on hatred. ...” the stylebook reads. “... Consider any potential harm your story could have. By including individuals who speak only from opinion, you can authenticate their narrative or semblance of expertise.”

Genelle Belmas, an associate professor at the University of Kansas who teaches media law, said we perhaps have to go a step beyond simply weighing how much coverage to give hate groups.

“We need to have a moral discussion about journalism,” she said. “Is it time to shed the objectivity notion? Don’t we have a moral responsibility to call out hate and lies and all that stuff?”

Further, she said one of journalists’ chief goals is to give a voice to the voiceless.

“I often wonder if we’re asking the wrong questions,” she said. “If we’re going to give a voice to the voiceless, maybe that’s us. What responsibility do we have to push back? I think we need to be asking that question.

“I worry about my kids,” she continued, speaking of her students, “but I think I worry more about the society they’ve inherited.”

Rhodes: Focus on ‘the most vulnerable’

The Human Rights Campaign recently

reported in early October that at least 32 transgender or gender non-conforming people have been killed by violent means this year, most of them Black and Latinx transgender women.

“We say ‘at least’ because too often these stories go unreported, or misreported,” the campaign said in a statement.

Most recently, 20-year-old Brooklyn Deshuna, a Black transgender woman, was killed in Shreveport, Louisiana, as a result of a gunshot wound. Hers was the fifth violent death of a transgender or gender non-conforming person in just 3 weeks, according to the HRC.

Rhodes said hate groups aren’t limited to those holding signs and organizing in chat rooms. He said police violence against transgender people is rampant, and that victims fear retaliation — or biased coverage if they actually open up to a journalist.

“I can’t tell you how many times as a reporter covering these issues, that somebody has cited horrible transphobic, homophobic, bigoted media coverage as why they won’t talk to me,” Rhodes said. “So much of my job is spent convincing people I’m not the one who’s going to hurt them.”

He said simply by considering sources — a victim and a police report — a reporter can glean who’s not sharing the whole story.

“It comes from an understanding of power, and who benefits from lying in this situation,” he said. “How would a transgender person stand to benefit from lying?”

Gay rights are one of many subjects in the crosshairs as confirmation of Supreme Court justice nominee Amy Coney Barrett would mean a 6-3 conservative advantage in the nation’s highest court — which will hear an argument in the case of the Affordable Care Act just one week after the general election.

Transgender people’s access to

healthcare will hang in the balance. The Trump administration has already tried to do away with it.

“When we think of LGBTQ issues, we think of gay marriage and same-sex adoption,” Rhodes said. “Those issues concern the most affluent people in society. The people who are going to access those rights have the means to. We need to focus more on the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ community.

“The media hasn’t even touched the surface of how queer issues need to be covered. It doesn’t see significant problems. It sees us as identities, and not people.”

Data loading ...

In 1978, the American Society of News Editors began collecting newsroom demographic data, with the goal of helping U.S. newsrooms align their diversity with that of the nation’s population. The ASNE and Associated Press Media Editors merged to form the News Leaders Association last year. The NLA indicated in June that because only 17 percent of newsrooms solicited submitted their data in 2018, the initiative was halted so the surveying process can be re-racked.

Seeing opportunity in a moment of reckoning, the NLA is updating the survey to collect data not just on race, ethnicity and gender, but also gender identity and sexual orientation.

Such associations can only provide guidance, of course, so it’s up to each individual newsroom to choose to undergo reform.

Rhodes is skeptical.

“There’s no reason we should still be saying ‘First Black investigative reporter of this bureau’,” he said. “I’m flabbergasted at the refusal by media leadership to see diversifying its ranks as anything more than an imperative. It’s absolute trash.”

Media outlets covering racial unrest in America need to include an examination of their own newsrooms

by Jackie Spinner

We are in the midst of a racial reckoning in our country that is more visible in some places than others, but in all places it is long overdue, including in our newsrooms.

The mostly peaceful protests that have swept the nation following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis by police feel like a turning point for equality and justice, and we have responsibility to report that story in ways we may never have done before.

It isn't going to be easy.

Our readers are suspicious of us and our motives because in some cases they've been told to be and in others we've given them a reason. Accusations of "fake news" have permeated every corner of our country, regardless of how big or small our publications are. That makes it especially hard during the pandemic to rally our communities around us as we, too, struggle financially. We aren't considered "essential" in many places, even though we know that when local journalism goes away, communities suffer. That's not just hyperbole. Local officials who pass laws and govern without local journalists watching them do so in the dark, and studies have shown that when that happens, voter turnout is lower and governments get less efficient.

I teach a course on war reporting every spring, and I ask my students to imagine what would happen if the government were the sole source of information when America is at war. We would always be winning. The parallels are apt for the coronavirus pandemic. If the government were our only source of news, we would not know about critical health care or testing shortages or where infection rates were increasing. We would always be winning.

It's hard to know where to begin in tackling the issues confronting us right now as journalists in America. Like everything else, we, "the media," have been politicized, which is frustrating to so many of us who got into this business simply to inform, without a partisan agenda.

It's also hard to know how to balance the deep divisions and politics of our readers themselves. Some of us are in communities that are deeply against any calls for police reform or who simply don't believe, based on their own individual white privileged experience, that abuse happens. Some of us are in communities that largely have low rates of infection from the coronavirus and yet the jobless rates are skyrocketing and small business owners are hurting. When we write about the pandemic, we often get accused of sensationalizing it because of this.

Even at Gateway Journalism Review,

"And yet most newsrooms remain disproportionately white, especially in comparison to their communities. Bias still exists, even unintentional. It's in the language we choose, the people we quote and the people we don't."

we hear from readers unhappy about our focus on covering Black Lives Matter or issues of race. If you subscribe to our digital newsletter, you know we are committed to stories about journalists of color and women, about highlighting successes and also in calling out racism and sexism. We've heard in recent weeks from readers who somehow equate the attention we are giving journalists covering the George Floyd protests to liberalism. We've been told we've lost our "conservative" roots. If that is code for an objection to our commitment to undoing racism in our own coverage and in our own virtual newsroom, we accept the indictment.

We must do a better job of explaining to our communities that we are part of them and also how we convey information. We can do this through direct communication, virtual forums or even Instagram stories that show us doing our jobs. We must do a better job of explaining to our communities how we scrutinize information, what steps we take to be fair and why we won't peddle in false equivalencies. We have to push back against this nonsense that all individual journalists are driven by the political agenda, that somehow we have profited off of the pandemic or the protests. Many of our colleagues have been laid off or furloughed and entire publications have been shut down. Many of the largest papers are giving away their pandemic coverage for free.

It will take courage, especially when it comes to confronting racial injustice, especially within our own newsrooms and communities.

Some of us live in places where racism has been allowed to fester and simmer for generations and calling it out will be threatening to those who have benefited from it. Others of us have been harmed deeply by that racism.

I know the road is long. I'm not naive to that or to what it's going to take to be a part of a movement for civil rights for all Americans.

But we can look carefully at our own

newsrooms, starting with diversifying them, but also in scrutinizing how we are telling these stories and if we are doing enough to explain to our readers what it is we do. Newsrooms that decide to adopt the AP Stylebook's recent change to capitalize Black when referring to people should explain to their readers why it's important, just as the Associated Press did in announcing the change. Newsrooms that decide not to, especially if they've adopted all other changes, need to answer to that as well.

We can be a catalyst for conversation in our communities, bringing people together to discuss the issues, hosting town halls virtually right now and sponsoring events in which people are able to talk to each other and over the noise of social media.

If we haven't actively sought ways to confront the racism in our communities by reporting on it, we have been complicit in allowing it to continue. We can no longer be silent. We need to report from and for the marginalized members of our communities, for people who have been hurt. We need to report on ourselves.

A number of newspapers have published open apologies for the way they contributed to slavery and discrimination even during the decades-long civil rights movement that began in 1954.

And yet most newsrooms remain disproportionately white, especially in comparison to their communities. Bias still exists, even unintentional. It's in the language we choose, the people we quote and the people we don't.

We shouldn't wait for history to demand a correction.

A version of this story first appeared in Publisher's Auxiliary, the only national publication serving America's community newspapers. It is published by the National Newspaper Association. GJR is partnering with Pub Aux to re-print Jackie Spinner's monthly "Local Matters" column on our website.

How Cincinnati news media reported a baseball broadcaster's anti-gay slur

by Zachary Jarrell

When Cincinnati Reds broadcaster Thom Brennaman got caught on a hot mic in August using an anti-gay slur, Megan Mitchell, an openly lesbian reporter and anchor at WLWT in Cincinnati, hoped her colleagues in the media would realize why it was an important story to cover.

It wasn't just about the slur, she told GJR.

"I think there needs to be more understanding about how words can dehumanize groups of people," she said. "The more we dehumanize someone, the more likely we are to commit acts of violence against them. So while it may only be words, it contributes to a system that can really hurt people for being who they are."

Brennaman apologized in the Aug. 19 broadcast, but the Cincinnati Reds suspended him anyway. He resigned from the team on Friday. (It's not clear who the slur was directed at or what the context was).

Major outlets in Cincinnati, including the Cincinnati Enquirer, WCPO, WLWT, WKRC (Local 12), WXIX (Fox 19), and WVXU radio, all covered the Brennaman story in the weeks after it broke, but Mitchell said her station's coverage was unique because she was able to contribute to it as a member of the LGBTQ community.

"I was able to utilize my voice best within my own newsroom," Mitchell said. "When reporters or managers had questions they didn't hesitate to run then by me, and it was a collaborative effort to put out something accurate while making sure it was inclusive."

Reporters need to make sure they're telling these kinds of stories through the lens of LGBTQ people "who are actually affected by it," she said.

Mitchell said fellow WLWT reporter, Brian Hamrick, the lead reporter on the Brennaman incident, reached out to her to get a positive perspective. She appreciated the opportunity to weigh in.

"The last thing you want to do is, just, take some random person off of the street and say, 'hey what are your random... thoughts?'"

The Cincinnati Enquirer led local coverage with more than 20 stories on the incident. Its opinion section focused on whether Brennaman would be fired, said Kevin Aldridge, Enquirer opinion editor.

The Enquirer's opinion writers maintained that he should not keep his job because of a "zero-tolerance policy" for hate speech, Aldridge said.

Jeff Blevins, chair of the journalism department at the University of Cincinnati, said journalists should have gone beyond that.

"By focusing just on Thom — should he be fired, should [he] be forgiven — treats the

incident like an individual problem and not a more systemic one," he said

He contends they should be asking questions like: "How regularly did Thom say things like that (off air) and is Fox Sports Ohio only dealing with this because Thom got caught when it inadvertently went out over the air?" Or what is "the culture at Fox Sports Ohio?"

Cincinnati's local coverage also included an apology letter from Brennaman himself, published by both the Enquirer and WCPO.

"Regardless of what my future holds in broadcasting," wrote Brennaman. "My actions have forced me to reflect on who I am and how I want to be seen and thought of."

WCPO added a column written by their reporter Evan Millward, who is openly gay.

"I wrote the column because of the reaction to the reaction to what happened," said Millward. He didn't want to have everyone "fire in," and then "just have it go away."

Millward believes "cancel culture," a word he hates using, plays a large role in stories that "go away," saying, "it signals we are not ready to have a difficult dialog with someone."

Canan said news media, not just WCPO, should ask the question, "are we still finding new ways to tell that story?" The answer right now: "no," he said.

News media need "to make sure the issues aren't swept under the rug until the next time there's an incident," Canan said.

WVXU, the NPR affiliate of Cincinnati, also included multiple perspectives in their reporting, including an article written by John Kiesewetter, reporter, that listed questions that have been left unanswered. Who heard it? Why did the Reds wait so long to take him off the air? And Who decided Brennaman should make his apology on air?

Both Fox 19 and Local 12 also provided extensive coverage in the days following the incident. Including reporting on their website and segments on air.

"Overall [Cincinnati news media] covered the story," Canan said. "And covered it with a level of sensitivity throughout the reporting process."

Gauging how the community itself felt about the incident was "tough because we all have our bubbles," said Mike Canan, senior director of local news at WCPO.

"In a COVID world where we're not communicating and talking to as many people, in real life, as we are used to, the primary place where you see the way people react to things is social media," said Canan. "And I don't know that's always 100 percent accurate."

Read Snyder v. Phelps if you think kneeling during the national anthem is offensive to the military

by Jeffrey Layne Blevins

The return of professional sports to our television screens late this summer has come with renewed attention to the Black Lives Matter social justice movement.

"Black Lives Matter" is painted on the court for every NBA game and the players are allowed to sport social justice slogans on the back of their jerseys.

In Cincinnati, where I live, star slugger Joey Votto donned a Black Lives Matter t-shirt during batting practice and joined some of his teammates in kneeling during the National Anthem. Meanwhile, in my hometown of St. Louis, pitcher Jack Flaherty drew the ire of several Cardinals fans after he became outspoken about social justice issues. In particular, it was the suggestion of kneeling during the anthem that sparked most of the outrage on social media, because (among other things) it was deemed offensive to the U.S. military, and reignited the controversy from 2017 over Colin Kaepernick and other NFL players who knelt.

As a U.S. Army veteran myself, I found the suggestion (especially by those who have not served) that kneeling during the anthem is somehow disrespectful to veterans, or anti-military, as intellectually misplaced. Of course, I do not speak for all members and veterans of the U.S. armed forces, and there is no consensus among military people about the issue. Also, as a journalist and now, journalism professor, I tend to be pretty thick skinned even when my professional group is the target of insulting expression. After all, free expression — one of the foundational freedoms the U.S. was built upon — does not require us to be respectful when airing our grievances.

However, assuming *arguendo* that kneeling during the National Anthem is disrespectful to the military, what would contemporary jurisprudence tell us about balancing offensive expression with honoring those who have served in the armed forces? That brings us to the U.S. Supreme Court's 2011 decision in *Snyder v. Phelps* (562 U.S. 443).

The Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka,

Kansas had been picketing outside the funerals of military personnel killed in the Iraq and Afghan wars. The father of one of the fallen soldiers, Albert Snyder, had filed a civil suit against Westboro Baptist for intentional infliction of emotional distress. While Snyder won a trial court decision and was awarded \$10.9 million in damages, a federal appeals court and the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the decision. In an 8-1 ruling, the Supreme Court held that Snyder was not entitled to a civil award because the First amendment protects from tort liability those who stage peaceful protests on matters of public concern, even near funerals of military personnel.

While peaceful in their physical behavior, the protesters brandished signs with patently offensive messages directed toward the fallen troops as their loved ones grieved, such as "Thank God for dead soldiers," "You're going to hell," and "God Hates You," as well as other slurs aimed at gays. Apparently, it was the Westboro Baptist's belief that God had damned the U.S. for its acceptance of "homosexuality."

Although, its argument was ultimately unsuccessful, the American Legion (an organization made up of armed forces veterans, which this author is a member of) filed an amicus curiae brief that maintained funerals are private and sensitive matters that have historically been as sacrosanct as homes and hospitals. Specifically, the Legion argued that burial rites have been respected in almost all civilizations, and long before the First Amendment.

However, the Court was ultimately not persuaded by these appeals to privacy, sensitivity, or even a call for common decency and respect for U.S. soldiers killed in combat. When balancing the right to present clearly offensive expression against the sanctity of funerals — even for military personnel — the interests of free expression prevailed.

Now, let's apply the Court's reasoning in *Snyder v. Phelps* to the matter of athletes kneeling during the National Anthem. Arguably, kneeling during the anthem is

not even in the same league of offensive expression as the messages the Westboro Baptist Church displayed outside of funerals for soldiers lost during war. At the same time, not standing for the anthem is still offensive to some.

Personally, as a veteran and an American Legion member, I would never kneel during the anthem or the presentation of the American flag. Even though I strongly support the cause of social justice for which these players are drawing attention, this form of expression would not be right for me, personally. I can only imagine the emotional effect that the anthem and the flag has on veterans who have seen some of the fellow soldiers come back home in coffins draped with the stars and stripes. (For the sake of accuracy, I was fortunate enough not to have seen combat during my time in the Army. While I did a tour in Korea from 1989-1990, my experience was more like an episode of the television sitcom, *M*A*S*H*; it was mostly comedy with only a little tragedy sprinkled in). My point here is only that I understand why some veterans might find kneeling during the anthem offensive.

Nonetheless, ideas about what is offensive are far too personal for even the Supreme Court to decide on national standards for what is acceptable when constitutionally protected expression and peaceful protests are involved. The First Amendment does not pick sides in our debates — it simply, but importantly, affords us the liberty to have them.

While seeing others not standing for the anthem might be offensive to some individuals, no one is physically harmed by watching (or knowing that) some other person knelt. Rather than obsessing about our dismay over the form of expression others may choose, perhaps we should focus our attention on the substance of the message itself. If the First Amendment is inclusive enough to even protect the right to display hateful expression toward soldiers killed in combat, then we can surely tolerate a quiet form of protest against institutional racism.

“ The First Amendment does not pick sides in our debates — it simply, but importantly, affords us the liberty to have them.”



Oh say can you see



Photos by Isabel Miller

Reuters photojournalist Lawrence Bryant makes a photo of protesters Sept. 26, in Louisville, Kentucky. The protests began after Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron announced a grand jury did not charge three police officers directly with Breonna Taylor's death.

Reporter's Notebook: Student journalists find a grieving city

by Kallie Cox and Nicolas Galindo

When the Daily Egyptian decided to send staff to Louisville to cover the protests, we prepared to walk into a war zone. Instead, we found ourselves welcomed into a grieving community, where people were attempting to cope with the loss of Breonna Taylor.

Taylor was killed March 13, when three Louisville Metro Police entered her apartment with a battering ram while executing a no-knock raid in plain clothes. In the confusion of police entering the residence, Taylor's boyfriend shot at police and officers responded by firing 30 bullets, killing Taylor. A grand jury decided the officers shouldn't face criminal charges in her death.

We were discouraged from going to Louisville by three journalism professors at our school, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The three, all longtime journalists,

told us it would be an unnecessary risk, that we would be walking into a dangerous situation, and we would not find anything the wires hadn't already published.

During our discussions on whether or not we should go and how we should cover it, we realized the wires were mostly focused on event and protest coverage. The four of us, Jared Treece, Isabel Miller and the two of us did not want to sit this out. The director of our School, documentarian Jan Thompson, agreed and gave us the go-ahead, telling one of the nervous professors that this story was like the Vietnam protests of his generation.

One of the stories we were hoping to tell was of the religious community's involvement during the protests. Before arriving, we reached out to a Catholic nun, Sister Beth Murphy in central Illinois to connect us to

religious leaders or activists in Louisville.

Murphy immediately sent names, emails, phone numbers and any information about who could be helpful. Within 24 hours, multiple Catholic sisters had put us in contact with organizers and activists in Louisville. We connected with three of our sources. Sister Murphy told us we were in the prayers of dozens of Catholic sisters. Later, Brother Tim Duncan, whom we met during the nightly protests, said he is 63-years-old and couldn't think of a more important time to be a journalist than right now and encouraged us in our work.

One of the first people we called was Sister Judy Morris, who directed us to Felicia Garr who declared herself our "Black mom in Louisville."

Protesting the injustices of racism offers Blacks an opportunity to regain Dignity



A protester reacts Sept. 25 after the Louisville Police Department fired flashbangs into the crowd of protesters. Chief Robert Schroeder said during a press conference the police used flashbangs to get the crowd's attention to provide direction on how to disperse.

Garr, a 52-year-old Black woman and Louisville native, gave us our first interview, let us know the lay of the land, directed us to all the protests and passed along any information she could.

Garr has been involved with organizing and participating in protests since the details of the Breonna Taylor case first came out. She has a daughter the same age as Taylor.

When we got to our hotel, she called us again, gave us a safety speech with tips on how to conduct ourselves and directed us to "not eat the food because Coronavirus is real." Once we had ourselves situated we hit the streets to walk towards Jefferson Square Park, ground zero for the Black Lives Matter Breonna Taylor protests in downtown Louisville.

We crossed into cordoned off downtown via Liberty Street and 2nd Avenue through the large concrete dividers placed to prevent vehicle traffic from entering the area in preparation of protests. The streets were devoid of the life and vibrance normally associated with a bustling downtown as we passed boarded up buildings up until we reached Jefferson Square Park or as the protesters dubbed it "Injustice Square."

The small square — which is situated in the heart of Louisville's legal buildings, with the county grand jury building to the south, the county court to the north, City Hall on the northwest corner, and the county jail on the southwest corner — held all the life and energy of the deserted downtown. There was a beautiful memorial in the center of the square in honor of Breonna Taylor surrounded by a community garden, free therapists, lawyers, medics offering medical care, and tents providing everyone with free food, water and masks.

A few hundred protesters milled around in the square, laughing, eating and dancing. There were young people, children, older people, people in wheelchairs or with walkers and individuals of every color.

Our team — made up of three white journalists and one Latino journalist — felt completely safe and comfortable with the protesters. Most people were polite and happy

to speak with us for interviews, which was a nice change from the treatment we normally receive from our own university's administration.

We expected to be looked down upon for being student journalists, but whenever we introduced ourselves as "student journalists with the Daily Egyptian" people brightened, supported us and were put at ease. We even met some former Salukis and Southern Illinoisans.

Even the local journalists took us in and offered advice, assistance and community. (Other student journalists also were covering the protests).

One of the members of our group, Nick, the co-author, was a prior professionally employed photojournalist who had made connections through the various social media networks. He met one of the Louisville Courier-Journal photographers at the square who helped provide information. From sending texts to where the protesters were meeting, to giving advice on what to do if law enforcement agencies cleared "Injustice Square" after curfew, Max Gersh was an excellent connection to have in Louisville.

Another photographer, Michael M. Santiago, who works for Getty Images, gave our group Sudecon wipes, which are used to decontaminate the face and eyes after getting sprayed with irritants such as mace or tear gas. Fortunately we didn't have to use them.

Santiago warned us and told us to be wary, but said protesters and the press had an understanding and looked after one another.

The protesters protected us, tried to feed us, give us water and even offered us rides to the "safe place," First Unitarian Church. They felt protected by the media's presence.

Whenever a tense moment arose between protesters and the police, they would call for the press to be front and center and ask us to record what was happening.

When the peaceful march through the East Market Neighborhood was met by a police blockade at East Market and South Hancock St. an organizer with a bullhorn shouted "all the press to the front! Show the world what they do to a peaceful protest!"

While the protests and marches during the day were peaceful on both sides, we were told that at night, all bets were off.

Curfew was terrifying. Police and law enforcement officers on roof tops would loudly announce if you did not disperse, you would be arrested.

The reporters and protesters around us wore all kinds of protective gear, from shin guards, bullet proof vests, goggles and helmets, to rifles and handguns. No one had any illusions of absolute safety and everyone was tense, knowing that at any moment, things could get rough. When people weren't chanting, an eerie silence would fall over the square broken only by the helicopters buzzing overhead.

On Friday night, we walked around downtown after curfew and interviewed people at First Unitarian. Two young girls, one of whom we learned was 15 and another who looked as though she couldn't have been older than 13, joined our group crying and screaming for help.

They got behind us and one grabbed onto our shirts and hid. A police car with its lights on jerked across the road. As it came speeding up behind the girls, they threw their hands up. The officer shouted at the girls through the window causing them to cry more.

They had been separated from their cousin and were lost trying to find the church to seek sanctuary and get off of the streets during the curfew.

Once the police realized we were press and saw that we had taken our phones out to record, they calmed down and let the girls stay with us. One girl begged for a ride because she sprained her ankle, but the officers refused and drove off. We sent two of our members ahead to the church to get a medic and walked with the injured girl until an older woman pulled over and offered to drive her.

During a peaceful afternoon Friday, officers performed kettling maneuvers and boxed protesters in on all sides, resulting in a tense standoff where the officers set off flashbangs.

A protester collapsed to the ground when this happened and one of our photographers, Isabel Miller, took photos. Another protester ran up, grabbed her and attempted to force her to delete her photographs.

She was able to convince him to let go of her by deleting one of the several photos she took of the moment. She later posted one of these takes to Instagram to emphasize what occurred during the police-protester clash.

Max Gersh, the Courier-Journal photographer, said this situation was the only time during his coverage of the protests he put on the helmet he carries with him.

We are in no way saying this is the experience of all journalists covering Louisville. Members of the press have been arrested and injured in the city on multiple occasions. We were only there two nights and there have been points during the 124 days of demonstrating where Louisville has been dangerous. Two officers were shot just last week in the wake of the grand jury's decision.

But this was our experience; we are grateful to the community that accepted us and allowed us to tell their stories.



Photo by Meredith Howard

Wear a mask sign: Baylor student Brittany LaVergne urges protestors to follow social distancing guidelines during five minutes of silence at the protest against the indictment in Breonna Taylor's case.

Another side of protests: Small peaceful gathering in Waco

by Meredith Howard

The protest that I covered Sept. 23 in Waco, Texas was nothing like the large, occasionally violent ones held in other regions. More than 50 people attended and no one was tear-gassed or arrested. I saw only a couple of counter protesters actually approach the group, screaming "Do you know the facts of the case? Breonna Taylor was a drug dealer!" But they left quickly as they were far outnumbered by protesters. They were also the only two people I saw who weren't wearing masks. (By the way, Taylor was not a suspected drug dealer.)

Grassroots protests such as the one I attended are actually more common than the occasionally violent ones you might hear about. The demonstration was organized by "three angry students" from Baylor University. They were unaffiliated with local Black Lives Matter chapters and other civil rights advocacy groups. The students organized the protest the same morning, when an officer who was involved in Breonna Taylor's case was indicted on charges of "wanton endangerment" for bullets that landed in a neighboring apartment.

One of the protest organizers held a sign with a QR code to check attendees' voter registration and register to vote. She walked around, addressing almost every group of people who had attended together, asking them if they needed help with their registration.

The organizers encouraged participants to download the app "5 calls," which provides

shortcuts to call local legislators. Protesters called Texas senators and urged them to vote to end qualified immunity that limits police accountability and no-knock warrants like the one police were enforcing when they used a battering ram to break into Taylor's apartment, prompting the gunfight in which she was killed. Organizers had signs with a script telling protesters how to address the senators and make their case.

Even though it was hosted by three students with no structural support in planning, the protest was well organized. The protest's flyer, which was posted online a few hours before it was held, listed many safety measures in place to ensure the gathering stayed peaceful.

Some of the precautions included prior notification to local police units of the protest and its intention, restricting protesters from blocking sidewalks, the street and driveways and careful consideration in signage wording.

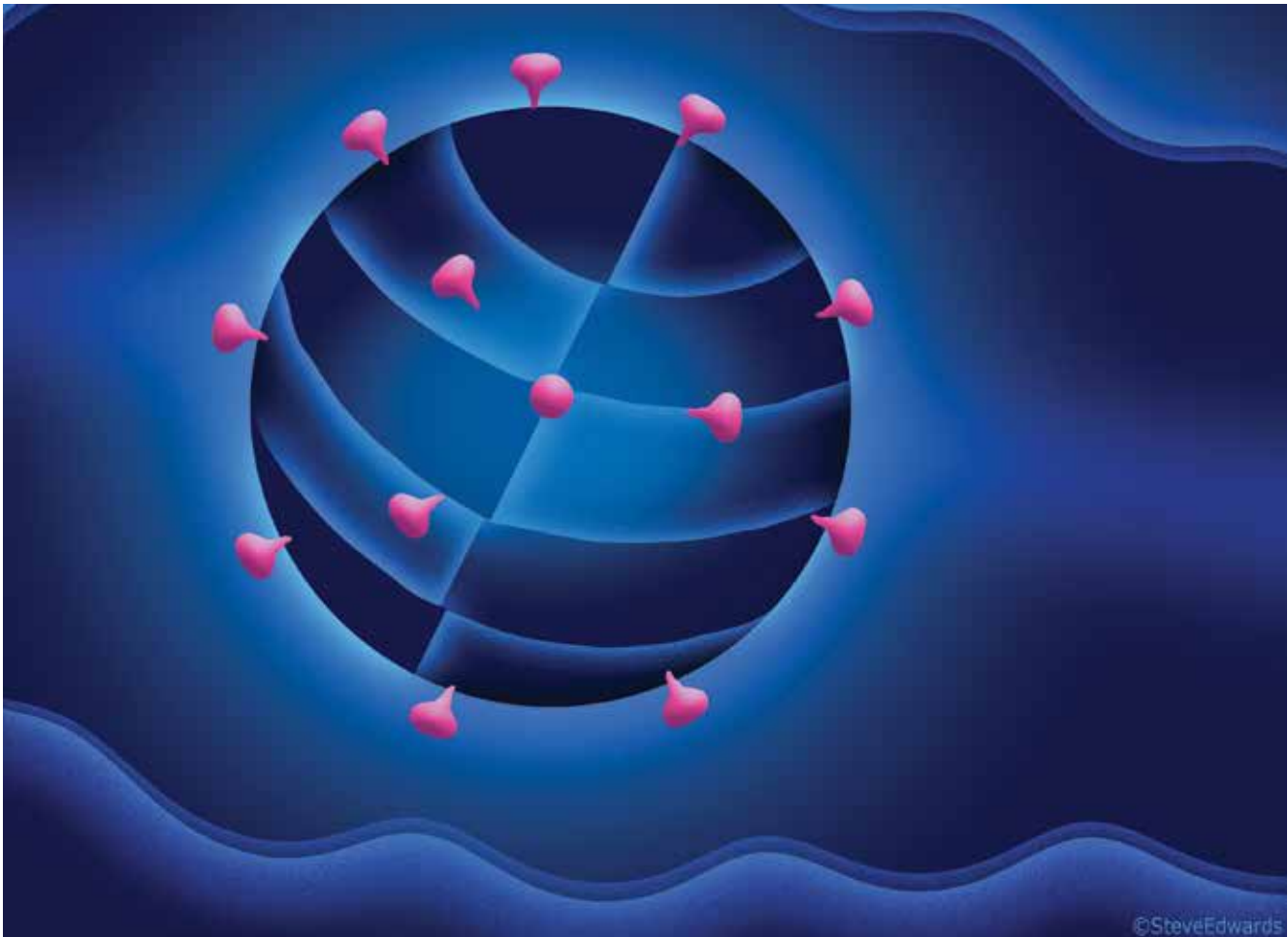
The peaceful nature of the gathering was orchestrated, and the students who put it together expertly diffused any small situations that arose, including the two men who infiltrated the crowd yelling defamatory statements about Taylor. The protesters responded in a calm, assured manner when people walked or drove by jeering at them.

The crowd's demeanor was productive anger. They lamented Taylor's death and focused their energy on police reform.

Protesters were unsurprised about the indictment, but expressed sorrow and disappointment that no officer was indicted for Taylor's death. The crowd included Black people and other people of color, but there were also a lot of white allies. I felt compelled to attend this protest as a white journalist because small, peaceful protests aren't widely discussed, and I wanted to add them into the protest narrative of this year.

After the voter registration, calls to senators and Black Lives Matter chants, protesters observed five minutes of silence and reflection while lying on the ground or kneeling, to imagine what it must be like to be a Black person in America fearing police brutality.

Near the end of the gathering, the organizers asked if anyone wanted to step up and address the group with their thoughts on Black Lives Matter, experiences with police brutality or anything else they wanted to say. When no one stepped up, the organizers provided encouragement and understanding. They said they were empathetic to the exhaustion faced by Black people being asked to explain their experiences with racism on a daily basis, and they emphasized that the most important product for protesters to leave with was knowing they were cared about and listened to. After the protest, one of the organizers, Brittany LaVergne, offered rides to attendees so they wouldn't have to walk home in the dark.



How coverage of the coronavirus pandemic compares with the AIDS pandemic

by Summer Hoagland-Abernathy

On July 3, 1981, The New York Times reported on a “rare gay cancer” that had been seen in 41 men. Although no one realized it at the time, the article by reporter and medical doctor Lawrence K. Altman was the first major news story on what would become the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It took another year and two months before the CDC used the term AIDS — acquired immunodeficiency syndrome — to put a name to the “cancer.”

Nearly 40 years later, The New York Times reported again on the early signs of a different global infection. The story from China, published on Jan. 6, 2020, described 59 people sickened in the central city of Wuhan by a “pneumonia-like illness.” That illness was the coronavirus, or COVID-19, the disease caused by a viral infection that has spread across the globe.

Stigmas Born of Fear

Because of the stigmas surrounding AIDS as the disease of homosexuals and heroin users, coverage was much more scarce than that of the coronavirus.

“There’s no comparison,” said Michele Zavos, a Washington D.C.-based attorney at

law with a majority of clients in the LGBTQIA+ community. “The reason for that is because mainstream culture, the political administration really denigrated gay men, and in the beginning, it was gay men. And then it spread more to the Black community and Black women and to drug users, and so it became more and more widespread. As long as it was gay men, mainstream culture didn’t care, but then eventually mainstream culture figures started dying, so that started changing.”

Zavos acted as the director of the American Bar Association’s AIDS Coordination Project — an initiative to inform lawyers of the legal issues around HIV/AIDS — from 1990 to 1996 and has published articles concerning those legal issues.

She credits Rock Hudson, a TV and movie star, whose career spanned from 1948 to 1985, with bringing international attention to the disease. One of the first mainstream figures to die from AIDS, Hudson searched the world for a cure.

Patricia D. Hawkins, Maryland-based executive director of the DC Community AIDS Network, who has a doctorate in psychology

with a medical specialization, attributes the lack of coverage in the early years of the AIDS pandemic to the stigmatizations and fear surrounding the disease.

“My spouse is also a clinical psychologist, and the other docs wouldn’t even eat lunch with her” after she began working with AIDS patients, she said. “The same thing happened with me. They were so afraid of getting the disease because they didn’t know how it was transmitted.”

But contraction of the disease was not the only issue for those working with AIDS patients.

“You were immediately considered to be gay, whether you were or you weren’t, and whatever attitudes people had toward gay people, they extended toward people with AIDS,” Hawkins said.

While the coronavirus does not have the CDC’s “four h’s” to avoid like AIDS did — homosexuals, heroin users, hemophiliacs and Haitians — racist attacks on Asians have increased around the globe as the coronavirus has spread. President Donald

Continued on next page

Trump has repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as the “China virus.”

People of color also have been disproportionately impacted by the disease. The Los Angeles Times reported on July 19 the infection rate for Pacific Islanders in L.A. County was six times that of the white population. The New York Times reported on July 5 the infection rate for Black Americans tends to be higher because of systemic inequities that force many into front-line jobs, public transit and close living quarters. In the Midwest, the first deaths from COVID-19 in Chicago and St. Louis were African-Americans.

Politicization of Human Lives

In the early days of the AIDS pandemic, President Ronald Reagan allowed the AIDS crisis in America to accelerate with a lack of attention to safety. Instead, his administration discredited the severity of the situation.

According to the CDC, between 1981 and 1990, over 100,000 people with AIDS died — Reagan’s presidency lasted from 1981 to 1989. By August, Trump said the coronavirus “is what it is.” Nearly 200,000 Americans have died since the virus was first detected in the United States half a year ago.

Douglas M. Foster, Chicago-based writer and professor of journalism at Northwestern University, pointed out the similarities between Trump and Reagan’s presidencies as one of the major similarities between the viruses.

“Ronald Reagan was president, and it took him several years of death and dying to even say the word AIDS,” he said. “His press secretary made jokes about it. If reporters assigned to the White House asked about it, he would laugh and say, ‘Why? Do you have it?’”

New Orleans- and New York-based journalist, author and activist Anne-christine d’Adesky attributes the politicization of masks to Trump.

“There are hurdles to accessing information and to applying information,” she said. “We see that today with the mask issue. I truly believe that because President Trump was and is afraid of not getting reelected, he has adopted an anti-science platform. He has equated not wearing a mask with personal liberty and put the lives of millions of Americans and other people at risk for exploitation of Covid. It’s a tragedy, and it’s very political.”

She said both AIDS and COVID-19 have been politicized but in different ways. Both, however, she said, play on fear and prejudice, and the way to fight against that is with information and informed decision-making.

This is where the press comes in. Because the Trump Administration continues to spread false information — for instance, Trump’s renewed push for hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 medication, which Dr. Anthony Fauci, who advised six presidents on the AIDS pandemic, continues to refute — it is the press’s duty to avoid spreading misinformation while also reporting that the information he spreads is, as he would say, “fake news.”

“Particularly in the early stages of that pandemic, there was no useful information

in mainstream media for many years,” Foster said. “There was a sense that mainstream media didn’t include gay men and lesbians. There was an assumption that newspapers were family matters, and therefore it would not be appropriate to use the language that would make clear how the virus was spread — semen and blood, for example. And there was no explicit mention of various forms of sexual transmission.”

During the early years of the AIDS pandemic, people craved knowledge on a disease that was not being tended to, in large part, by their political and religious leaders. Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, what people need is harm prevention from those same people.

“Every community knows its own leaders, its own solutions, its own ways to get information,” said d’Adesky. “It’s going to be the pastors and churches, it’s going to be the people who do the food banks, it’s going to be the local leaders and it’s going to be the sports coaches and all these folks who are community leaders who are going to be delivering the message that’s going to be heard by people within their communities.”

Many newspapers did not report on AIDS due to the stigmas surrounding the ways it spreads, and the ramifications of this failure to seek out the truth and report it are clear, Foster noted.

Medical Masks and Condoms and Dirty Needles

“It’s the human condition that we would prefer to not look at what may scare us,” said d’Adesky. “We would prefer not to be uncomfortable, so I think that many people in America ... said, ‘That’s only relevant to people who are engaging in sex that’s not the sex I engage in.’”

She also cited the Catholic Church and federal authorities as roadblocks on the way to AIDS prevention, with the Church’s ban on condoms and the authorities’ reluctance to accept disposable needles as harm reduction for heroin users.

“There was this huge campaign about clean needles — wanting people to bring in dirty needles, and they would get a clean needle, no questions asked,” said Zavos. “Of course, a lot of the government went berserk over this, [saying,] ‘You’re helping people be drug users.’”

Michael O’Loughlin, Chicago-based national correspondent for America Magazine: The Jesuit Review and the host of the podcast “Plague: The Untold Stories of AIDS and the Catholic Church,” said one criticism of the Catholic Church was its political response to the use of condoms during the early years of the AIDS pandemic.

O’Loughlin explained that while the Catholic Church had some high-ranking bishops who said condoms were okay as long as they helped prevent the spread of disease instead of pregnancy, the Vatican and a powerful, conservative group of U.S. bishops prohibited all use, applied and educational.

“The issue was the Church is a very powerful player, especially in big cities,”

O’Loughlin said. “It was actually using its political power to prevent public health education about the effectiveness of condoms.”

Just as studies have found needle exchanges and condoms have helped to prevent the spread of HIV, studies have also found masks help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

D’Adesky attributed today’s fear of masks as stemming from the initial concerns of the Trump administration regarding a scarcity of protective personal equipment (PPE) and the federal effort to prioritize access of N-95 masks specifically, to healthcare workers and frontline essential workers.

Hawkins compared wearing masks to wearing an awareness AIDS pin in that people are and were harassed for wearing each in public.

How journalism and other media can offer support to the cause of getting everyone on board with wearing masks is not only to normalize them but to make them cool.

Many articles about masks revolve around how to wear them safely, and one New York Times article pleads in the title for the public to “Seriously, Just Wear Your Mask.”

Cosmopolitan has already done pieces like this — “Are Face Masks the Latest It-Accessory?” and “5 People on What It’s Like to Have Sex with a Mask On.”

Publications do not have to hide from stigmas like they did with condoms and needles. Masks can be, as Cosmo puts it, “the latest it-accessory.”

Back to the Future

Just as the 1980s saw the popularization of condoms — due to HIV — and consumerism — due to the advent of malls and Madonna — the 2020s could see the popularization of masks due to consumerism. And while looking to the past to inform the future is not a new concept, it is an important one.

In medicine: From her work as a clinical psychologist, working with AIDS patients, Hawkins can foresee that survivor’s guilt could be a heavy burden for former COVID-19 patients and their families to bear in the future.

In hope for a cure: With his historical research for “Plague: The Untold Stories of AIDS and the Catholic Church,” O’Loughlin found the cautionary parallel between the search for the cure of HIV and COVID-19.

“When I see the stories today about how a vaccine is just a few months away and there might be one by the end of the year, it makes me cringe a little bit,” he said. “Obviously science is very different. The coronavirus is not HIV. But there was this hope for a cure that would end the HIV and AIDS crisis very quickly that did not materialize. Science takes time. It takes cooperation. It takes money.”

In journalism: D’Adesky noted what past journalism on AIDS is doing for current reporting on the coronavirus.

“We have applied and been able to benefit from the lessons of the early AIDS reporting,” she said.

'If the coronavirus is a war, Americans have picked a team'

Jackie Spinner

There is a weariness about life at that moment that I haven't felt since I was in Iraq reporting on the war.

War reporters are used to risk calculations, and it's an odd thing to get used to, but we do it because otherwise everything would feel too dangerous or nothing would. When nothing feels dangerous, it's time to go home. That's when reporters take risks they shouldn't and end up getting hurt. It's necessary but exhausting having to think through every decision.

I thought once I put my flak jacket away that I wouldn't be making those kinds of calculations again.

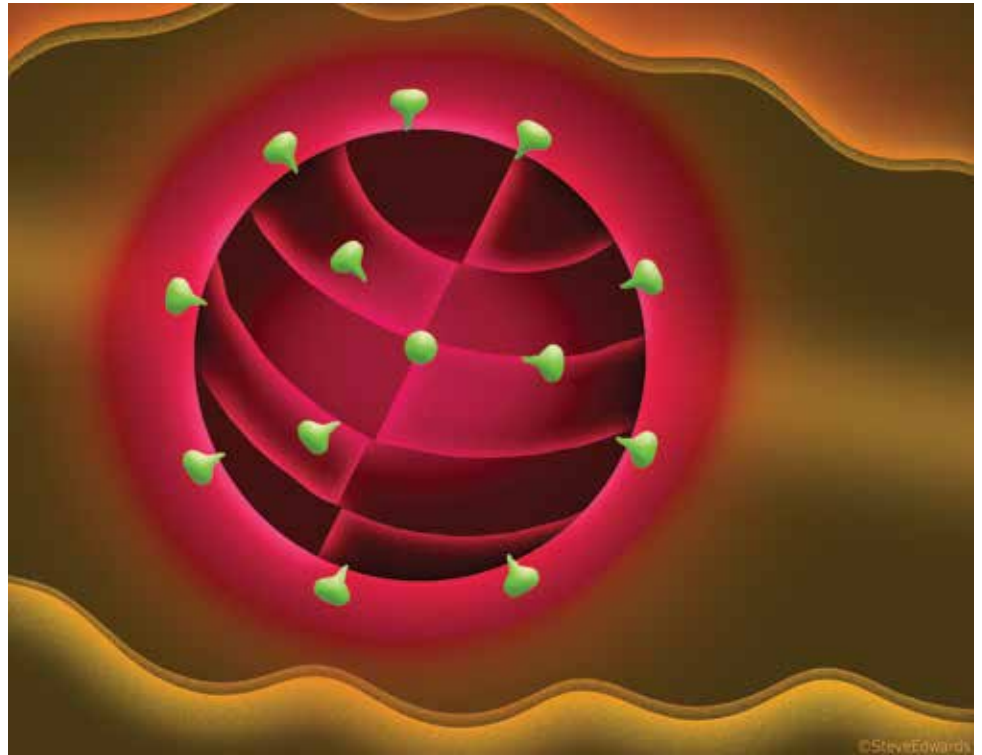
But when I went for a haircut this summer, my first since the pandemic started, I found myself doing the same checks I used to do before going on an embed with the Army. I sat in the quiet of the car for a few moments to get focused. Before I got out, I put sanitizer on my hands and checked my facemask to make sure it was sealed properly. At the door of the salon, I looked inside to see if everyone was wearing a mask. When I went in and learned my stylist was late, I left immediately to wait outside in the fresh air. As people walked past, I moved back to give us both space. I was in the same mode when I went on a foot patrol with the military. It unsettled me how easy it was to slip back into the kind of alertness, the mindset that everyone could potentially be a threat.

If you've never been to war, you may not understand. In fact, if I shared this story on social media, I'm sure I'd hear from all sides of a polarized America. If the coronavirus is a war, Americans have picked a team. But my calculations had nothing to do with politics. For most reporters in a war zone, for most soldiers even, politics don't enter into risk calculations.

That makes it challenging to cover this story, particularly when many of our readers are making decisions based on politics. We can't be divorced from the actual experiences of our readers because we are living them, too. But we also can't afford the appearance that we have abandoned our attempt to be objective in telling them.

On a recent assignment in rural Indiana, I listened to understand someone I didn't personally agree with, although he didn't know it because I didn't tell him what I thought. I wore a mask; he didn't. From a distance, I asked my questions and got my story without getting into a debate because that isn't the point of what we do. It's to listen.

As we cover the pandemic, we owe it to our readers to listen to understand and to seek out a diversity of opinion, not to present a false equivalency but rather to make certain that we aren't leaving out voices in our community. We do that by



borrowing from the unspoken manual of the reporters who covered the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

We have a responsibility to be a witness, even if doing so puts us at some risk. We can mitigate the risk by arming ourselves — and our staff — with the gear needed to keep everyone safe, by having protocols and following them. We should withhold judgment from members of our newsroom staff who feel skittish about certain risks. Someone else will step up. Not everyone in my newsroom volunteered to go to war, and that's okay, because if everyone is on the frontline, nobody is in the control room with a landscape view.

As we move through our communities talking to people, we need to remind ourselves and our staff that our opinion doesn't matter. It's been more than a decade since I returned from war, and I've given dozens, if not hundreds, of interviews and speeches about my experience. I wrote a book about it. I have not once publically shared whether I thought it was a good or a bad idea for the US to invade Iraq. I haven't shared it in a classroom. I haven't talked about it on social media. My opinion simply doesn't matter. What matters is my experience, the stories I captured, the voices of the people who interviewed.

We need to show people how we do our job. That's different than making ourselves central to a story, but if we are going to keep or earn back our community's trust, we need to explain the decisions we make and what motivates us as journalists. We can lament the media illiteracy in our country,

how people don't understand the difference between news and editorial, but if we don't work to fix it, we will end up the real losers in the war on truth because there will be nobody left to amplify it.

Our credibility is more important than our bravery. That's something I learned early on in my years covering the war. We need our credibility to cover the decisions our school districts are making to reopen or stay remote in the fall. We need our credibility to cover mask mandates from our local officials. We need our credibility to cover the stories of our healthcare and frontline workers. We need our credibility to cover our emergency responders and the people they encounter and are charged to care for and protect. We need our credibility to push back against misinformation and hoaxes, against the countless memes that compete with our own fact-checked reporting.

In the end, of the many lessons I carried from the battlefield, perhaps this is the most important one. We need to be vigilant in guarding our credibility. But we also need to make sure that we get it right. The science is—and will continue—to change. We can explain to our readers that science evolves as it is tested and researched. Policies will be made and will be rejected to reflect both the science, the political will of the people making them and, frankly, the will of the people who put them in charge. We serve our readers best when we not only hold these policymakers accountable but also ourselves. We serve our readers best when we remind them that in war, we are all human.

Foley Foundation creates safety modules for journalism professors to help students covering pandemic, protests

by Bob Chiarito

Four years after creating safety modules for journalism graduate students, Thomas Durkin, education program director at the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation, realized many undergraduates were out reporting in situations that required awareness and decided to take action.

"We would talk to students. I remember being at the University of Michigan and a student told me about how he arrived at a shooting and didn't know what protocols to use, what to ask," said Durkin, who was James Foley's best friend and now also an English professor at Marquette University, where they both attended. James Foley, was an American freelance reporter who was killed by ISIS in 2014 and for whom the Foley Foundation is named for.

"We asked ourselves, why are we waiting until graduate school to teach journalists about safety? These undergrads are working as journalists," Durkin said. "So, to not have them prepared in particular at places like Marquette where it's inner-city. Students are out there working as journalists and they are being taught how to interview people but they aren't being taught how to do a risk assessment."

Indeed, many undergrads freelance for professional publications and many work for student publications that have been covering the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests and chaos that was kicked off by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis May 25.

Durkin and his colleagues at the Foley Foundation collaborated with the Marquette University Diederich College of Communication to create 12 modules for undergraduate journalism professors to work into their classes. Several focus on broad topics that apply to most scenarios, such as making a risk assessment, digital security, and self-care. Others are more specific, such as creating a culture of safety in a newsroom, covering foreign conflicts, covering natural disasters and weather-related events and a new module recently created, the 13th, on covering the COVID-19 pandemic.

The modules, which are largely a collection of news stories and other resources, are free for universities to use and are meant to be integrated in already established classes, not their own class, which is largely what separates the undergraduate modules from the graduate modules that have been around since 2016.

"What's really hard at the undergraduate level at any school is trying to introduce new courses," Durkin said. "One of our concerns was for undergraduates to show professors and instructors that they don't have to change their course. They can add this to it. They don't have to do anything in a linear fashion. There are 13 different modules. You can pick what works for your course. The student may end

up doing some similar stuff in other courses but in our minds that just reinforces it. As an English major you don't say I already read this book in another course, I don't need it."

One professor who has already implemented the modules is Bill Gentile, an American University Professor and former foreign correspondent who spent several years reporting from Mexico and Nicaragua. For Gentile, who created and teaches a class called Foreign Correspondent for undergraduates and graduate students, the Foley Foundation modules supplement what he's already been teaching and are nice because they focus on more issues than the ones faced by reporters going overseas.

"It isn't a luxury anymore, it's become a real necessity because you have these young people going to cover places like Minneapolis and they need this training. It's not just for foreign correspondents," Gentile said.

"What the Foley Foundation has done by creating these modules, there's a summary to it. It's basically articles," Durkin said. "I summarized the articles and provided discussion questions. For each module there's probably 5-10 resources. I don't expect a professor to use 5-10. You can read the summaries and use the discussion questions, or you can use the articles and skip the discussion questions. I'm just trying to make it as easy as possible. We've done the research for them."

Durkin said the undergraduate modules, first introduced at James Foley's alma mater Marquette in the fall of 2019, is now available for any school that wants to implement it, for no cost. They are contained online in a PDF that can be easily tweaked, as a lot of the topics change and need to be updated.

"We don't feel like it's proprietary," Durkin said. "The reason we did it is that we want people to be safe. All we want from them is the ability to list them on our website because a lot of this is momentum. If you're a journalism school, you do not want to be left behind... My plan is to go through it and update it each year. Things change fast so things can get outdated," Durkin said.

He also said that he's heard from employers who have told him that college students with safety training are more attractive candidates when it comes to hiring reporters.

"We were at Columbia University with ACOS for an event and representatives from media companies were there and they told us if they were looking to hire someone and knew a candidate who had safety training, they would be more hireable because it makes it easier to on-board them," Durkin said.

"We wouldn't hire someone only on that basis but it's definitely an added plus," Hervé Rouach, Chief Editor, North America for Agence France-Presse said. "I've never

thought about it but it's very useful. People need to be properly trained, properly equipped, so it's something positive."

Shamus Toomey, editor in chief and co-founder of Block Club Chicago, a news organization that focuses on neighborhood news and has done many stories about the COVID-19 pandemic and protests and unrest following the death of George Floyd, said it's nice to know young reporters are getting training rather than having to pick up tips as they go along.

"There are a lot of journalism skills that don't get taught in the classroom. Reporters often have to learn them on the job by watching others or picking the brains of veteran reporters. It's great to hear such important skills will be taught by this program. I know it's something that would catch my eye from a job applicant," Toomey said.

Moni Basu, a former CNN correspondent who spent a lot of time reporting from Iraq and currently teaches journalism at the University of Florida said fending for herself is exactly how she learned and is not what she advises young reporters to do.

"I never had any training and know that is not the right way to do it," Basu said. She added that she's implemented the modules into a class on crisis reporting that she developed called "Reporting from Ground Zero."

"The James Foley Foundation materials are absolutely essential," Basu said.

One thing that professors like Basu and Gentile who have implemented it into their classes already seem to like is that it doesn't force them to stop what they are teaching to focus solely on safety. Rather, they can choose what they feel applies and use it in their class, often as only a conversation starter.

"You could pull pieces very easily and that's what I've done," said Lauren Walsh, a New York University faculty member who runs the school's photojournalism program.

"I think it's absolutely integral that all journalism students start thinking about it," Walsh said, adding that because they haven't been working long, they haven't developed bad habits that need to be addressed, another reason why it makes sense to teach undergrads. So far, she said her students have enjoyed the addition of the modules.

"I present it with the language of journalistic safety but also that it's an essential piece of journalism. The students have been great with it...Contrary to what one might think, they were really on board with setting up protocols. I met no resistance and they are students so there's no need to change bad habits," Walsh said. "They aren't fighting against what they've been doing for the last ten years, which is another reason to start implementing at a younger level...I think it should be in all journalism schools."

Local governments use pandemic to try to stall FOIAs

by Emma Sulski

FOIA advocates in Illinois successfully fought off attempts by local governments to slow access to public information in the early stages of the pandemic. But many journalists are still warily watching how the local leaders conduct business in the “new normal” of virtual meetings and limited or reduced access to government offices.

“You have to be vigilant all the time,” said Marie Dillon, director of policy for the Better Government Association.

Dillon was part of a team of advocates who pushed back when the Illinois Municipal League tried earlier this year to get Attorney General Kwame Raoul to declare FOIA as a “non-essential service” during the state’s stay-at-home order. The league is the main lobbying organization for the state’s municipalities.

FOIA provides the public a pathway to request government-controlled records, files or documents. While the law is commonly used by journalists to uncover otherwise undisclosed information and report it to the public, FOIA was created to be accessible to anyone.

“This is just the latest in an effort by government entities who are opposed to transparency to try to take advantage of the pandemic to keep people from getting records that they’re entitled to,” said Matthew Topic, one of the state’s leading First Amendment attorneys. Topic, a lawyer with Chicago-based Loevy & Loevy and outside general counsel for BGA, has litigated hundreds of FOIA cases across the country and helped obtain the release of the Laquan McDonald shooting video in 2015.

Dillon said almost as soon as the coronavirus became widespread this spring, she began to see Illinois governments cutting corners and declaring FOIA a non-essential function. This immediately became a point of contention between journalists and government officials.

Under Illinois law, government departments are required to respond to FOIA within five business days of receipt of the request. However when there might be an understandable shortage in staffing, it’s common practice to negotiate a longer deadline. That’s why FOIA activists like Dillon and Topic felt so vehemently opposed to any bill which would give governments the right to ignore FOIA altogether. The pair authored an op-ed for The Chicago Tribune stressing their viewpoint and commending Raoul for standing his ground.

On March 17, Raoul posted guidance for FOIA during the public health emergency.

“Public bodies ... should continue to comply with FOIA and respond to each request promptly, to the extent they are able to, given the limitation on staff and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic,” the document said.

During the week of May 20, the Illinois

“ This is just the latest in an effort by government entities who are opposed to transparency to try to take advantage of the pandemic to keep people from getting records that they’re entitled to.”

— Matthew Topic

General Assembly held a legislative session which lasted just over four days. The municipal league’s proposed FOIA restrictions were tucked into an omnibus bill on the night of May 21. The session was expected to end the next day. If the bill passed, the provision excusing FOIA requests for the remainder of the pandemic would be included.

“But it certainly feels like every legislative session there’s some bill introduced by the Illinois Municipal League or the Sheriffs’ Association attempting to create new exemptions or otherwise make it harder or impossible for people to get access to records,” Topic said.

Dillon echoed similar sentiments.

“It is not at all uncommon,” Dillon said.

“All the time. It’s a constant battle.”

Executive Director Brad Cole of the Illinois Municipal League did not respond to repeated requests through its website for comment.

The provision proposed that FOIA deadlines would not apply during the emergency, retroactive to the beginning of it, and until 30 days after.

While a delay of 30 days might not seem drastically significant, according to Topic, those few weeks can become the difference between front-page news and a forgotten story.

“It’s hard enough to get the public’s attention on issues,” Topic said. “The farther you move what you have to say from the events that precipitated it, the harder it is to have people fully understand or appreciate what it is you’re trying to say. To delay by 30 days or more would basically allow public officials to escape scrutiny over their conduct during these times.”

There’s plenty a government might try to hide if FOIA weren’t in place to demand integrity, Topic said. He mentioned the records of public health departments as a major citation. However, the uplifting of FOIA wouldn’t just affect pandemic-related records — it affects all rightfully public information. For example, the withholding of police misconduct records in a time of major protests against police brutality could potentially permit officers to escape penalty

for their actions.

“Our need to know about government activity and to hold governments accountable is not suspended because of the pandemic,” said David Greising, president and CEO of the BGA. “To just suspend FOIA, not only does that undermine accountability, it flouts the law.”

Dillon said she stayed up most of the night of May 21 writing testimony since she couldn’t testify in person. She and Topic had to submit their testimony to the BGA’s lobbyist in Springfield and hope for the best.

On the afternoon of May 23, the bill was amended, making the deadlines even longer than originally proposed.

“I almost thought we were sunk,” Dillon said. “But after they made it worse we got mad and energized, and the reporters kind of woke up.”

“As journalists we’re filing FOIA requests all the time during the pandemic,” said longtime investigative journalist Sam Roe. “How many cases are there? How many cases have there been in nursing homes? In packing plants? In schools? What are schools saying behind the scenes about reopening in the fall? These are all questions people really need to know to make basic decisions about how to conduct their daily routine.”

After much debate on the House floor, the bill failed, but with a motion to “reconsider.” Dillon said she and the BGA spent a few hours lobbying the ‘no’ votes while other bills were being passed. Eventually, the FOIA provision was removed from the proposed legislation, and the bill passed without it.

“I don’t know what happened,” Dillon said. “I can just tell you we worked really hard and made a lot of noise and they did the right thing. So we’re very happy that it went that way, but I don’t know the magic formula for stopping it next time.”

While Dillon said she considers this a win, she knows this won’t be the last time she has to fight for FOIA. “It’ll never be good enough, in my opinion, and it’ll never be fixed.”

Community journalists should serve as fact-checkers on national stories

by Jackie Spinner

A few weeks ago a former elementary school classmate of mine shared a viral post on Facebook about how Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden was going to raise taxes for middle income families by 25%.

I did a quick Google search and found that the post had been fact-checked already by reputable news outlets and was untrue. (For the record, my suspicion was not partisan; I don't assume any political memes on social media are true.) I politely told my former classmate the post was incorrect.

It didn't matter, my former classmate responded. It would be true in the future because Biden was a "socialist." At that, I dropped out of the conversation.

It would be easy to throw up our hands and let social media be social media. After all, we have our own problems in local journalism with getting people to trust us with information that doesn't fit their belief system. Perhaps my former classmate assumes that because I'm a journalist, I have an agenda. Perhaps he thinks I've taken sides in the election. Maybe in my search for truth, I have.

But our brief exchange made me wonder how community journalists can serve as fact-checkers and sources of information in the upcoming presidential election, far from our local beats.

Major news outlets already do this, of course, and we don't have the resources or time to duplicate those efforts. We don't need to fact-check every political speech. NPR will do that in real time, as will the New York Times and The Washington Post.

But we know that our readers trust us more, according to a 2019 Knight-Gallup study. Even if it is only because they don't trust national media at all, we can use that small faith in our local newsmaking to help our community readers navigate the polarized election cycle.

We can invite readers to send us memes and social media posts that "feel" or "sound"

“ Let's be honest with our readers. We don't fact-check because we want to find lies. We fact-check because we want to find the truth.”

right to them. Then we can fact-check them and explain how we came to the conclusion that they were accurate or not. Maybe we will be more convincing than a former elementary school classmate.

Perhaps we start when politicians talk about our communities, about rural voters, about unemployment during the pandemic, about remote learning, about the postal service. How will a candidate's policies really affect us? What do we stand to gain or lose? These are important questions for us to ask on behalf of our communities and to ask in a way that the answers are trusted.

Let's be honest with our readers. We don't fact-check because we want to find lies. We fact-check because we want to find the truth.

As journalists, we are natural skeptics. We are not inclined to believe anyone, and if we keep our political beliefs to ourselves, we retain the credibility to question everyone, to look into a meme and report whether it's true or not.

There is a vast middle between the people who love us and the people who hate us. There is a vast middle between the people who don't believe anything on social media and the people who believe everything. We owe it to them to step into the mud.

“ Perhaps my former classmate assumes that because I'm a journalist, I have an agenda. Perhaps he thinks I've taken sides in the election. Maybe in my search for truth, I have.”

GJR celebrates 50 years, honors St. Louis locals with Whistleblower and Freedom Fighter awards

by Amelia Blakely

St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter Jeremy Kohler and St. Louis Attorney Mark Pedroli will be honored by Gateway Journalism Review this week for keeping tabs on St. Louis County government and transparency within Missouri's government.

Additionally, GJR will present PBS Newshour's anchor Judy Woodruff a Lifetime Achievement Award at the magazine's 50th anniversary virtual celebration on Oct. 13. Gateway was founded in 1970 as St. Louis Journalism Review by Charles and Rose Klotzer.

The event will include a pre-election conversation with Woodruff. The anniversary celebration and awards ceremony, the magazine's primary fundraiser each year, was postponed in April because of the pandemic.

2020 Freedom Fighter Award

Jeremy Kohler was awarded the 2020 Freedom Fighter Award for his investigative reporting uncovering a pay-to-play scheme of former St. Louis County Executive Steve Stenger.

Kohler has worked for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch for about 22 years.

In addition to his reporting on Stenger, Kohler also extensively covered the McCloskey couple who were recently indicted by a St. Louis grand jury for waving guns at racial injustice protestors over the summer and Ferguson protests in 2014, said St. Louis Post-Dispatch Editor-in-Chief Gilbert Bailon.

"Recently, he's been an outstanding beat reporter on the St. Louis County beat," Bailon said. "That beat is ripe with everything from political intrigue, the pandemic, and jail deaths. By nature, he is an investigative reporter, but he's a damn good beat reporter too."

Bailon said Kohler's investigative and storytelling skills are what keeps him continually publishing hard-hitting stories that help keep the Dispatch's work relevant to a local and, sometimes, the national audience – even as local newspapers across the country are in a financial crisis.

"He is very astute and a keen observer," Bailon said.

Since the pandemic began in March, Kohler said reporting his beat has been one of the busiest at the paper, as he kept an eye on a zoom meeting for a story he was currently following in an interview with GJR.

"It's been an enormously uncommon year," Kohler said. "It's been really two years of constantly breaking news."

In addition to being in multiple places in one time keeping tabs on multiple stories Kohler also tries to plan investigations for his own story ideas in attempts to set the agenda of the public discussion instead of simply reacting to the news cycle, he said.

2020 Whistleblower Award

Mark Pedroli, an attorney and founder of the Sunshine and Accountability Project, was awarded GJR's 2020 Whistleblower Award for unearthing Missouri government

secrets by using the state's sunshine law.

Tony Messenger, St. Louis Post-Dispatch columnist who has written about Pedroli's cases against the government officials for violating the transparency law said the attorney's cases elevated the issue of transparency with his suits.

"Those lawsuits make a big deal," Messenger said. "Writing about these issues don't necessarily force lawmakers to do the right thing, but when they have to go to court and defend their actions, they look at sunshine a bit differently."

Pedroli's successes have brought real accountability in city government, Messenger said.

He has sued the former Missouri Governor Eric Greitens for using a burner app, Missouri House of Representatives, and St. Louis County jails, among other governmental entities, Pedroli told GJR.

The Sunshine and Accountability Project's recent litigation was against the St. Louis City for having closed meetings about airport privatization. The attempt has since failed, arguably because of the Project's suit, Pedroli said.

"Most of the records we are litigating over are public records and should be disclosed. Not only because they are public records, but because these records also help the public weigh in on reforms that need to be done. For example, in the prisons," Pedroli said.

Since the pandemic, the Sunshine and Accountability Project has followed who knew what and when regarding the Coronavirus, Pedroli said.

"We know that there was a wide variety of Senate and House of Representative Members who were in meetings in February. Top Secret meetings about science – what's so secret about the deadliness of a virus?" Pedroli said about the report that elected officials had private meetings a month before the pandemic began, warning about the potential consequences the virus could have on the nation's economy and the stock market. "We know what happened with those secrets. They used them for their advantage and sold stock before the market collapsed."

To him, transparency is a prerequisite to civil liberties, the ability to reform a democratic government, and keeping the public safe.



