

Journalism failed the young editors and staffers at The Daily Northwestern—not the other way around

Too easy.

That's how fast the anger and confusion came from those who reacted negatively to the [apology](#) offered recently by the editor and staffers of The Daily Northwestern for their coverage of former Attorney General Jeff Sessions' campus appearance. But the extreme measure of removing well- and fairly sourced photos, removing a protester's name in a vital act of attribution and apologizing for good hustle was not the malpractice we'd like to imagine.

As Editor Troy Closson's [Twitter thread](#) revealed, it was a cry for help. Not a sniveling, weak-kneed cry stakeholders would like to imagine but one of leadership and a call to action to know better and do better in an environment where the news media's credibility and tactics are questioned and diminished daily.

/1 Yesterday, [@thedailyynu](#) published a statement on our coverage of the Jeff Sessions event and protests on campus last week and I wanted to address the concerns that everyone has shared on Twitter.

– Troy Closson (@troy_closson) [November 12, 2019](#)

The real malpractice will occur if we, who do this work and believe in the democratizing force of journalism, don't listen to what these young journalists are trying to tell us about ourselves, our society. The real change that must occur falls

on an industry that has largely failed to equip itself to navigate increasingly diverse environments because it maintains a terrible track record of writing and speaking across difference.

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The orthodoxy of objectivity teaches us to block out the noise: But this approach has been revealed for the scam it is – a white, male, privileged, Western default worldview that doesn't center anyone who doesn't fit. This matters because the stories we tell become the world we are.

“We cannot default to an assumption that journalism is a static and unyielding set of actions that shouldn't be questioned,” tweeted Heather Bryant, director of Project Facet, a [journalism collaborative](#). “Our work is to question everything, and that must include ourselves and our processes.”

This affair illustrates how audiences have come to regard journalists as an extractive force that is not truly interested in telling the full story of communities we serve. I've met many activists who view the Fourth Estate as a proxy for power more than a force for good and engagement with democratic ideals. The dangerous “[no media, safe space](#)” ethos runs so deeply certain communities can't even fathom working with – or leveraging – the media, they are so sick of us.

Journalist Madeline Faber [offers](#) food for thought: “I wonder if there are cases where we further an ethic of care by silencing our demand for knowledge and closure. What happens to journalism when we finally admit that inquiry can be invasive?”



Student protestors bang on the door outside the campus building where former Attorney General Jeff Sessions delivered a speech on Nov. 5 at Northwestern University. (Photo by Ignacio Calderon)

As managing editor of [MLK50: Justice Through Journalism](#), our Memphis-based team focuses on the intersection of poverty, power and policy, and takes great pains to center the voices of people often rendered as chalk outlines – or not at all. When writing about the latest jobs numbers or corporate tax breaks, we're prone to ask who is not included in the statistical breakdown, or how many of the jobs promised by corporate leaders will lead to middle-class jobs, not just any ol' job?

In this time of great inequality, the answers frequently reveal how power is the greatest beneficiary in any civic, economic or social enterprise. The fix is in, but so much coverage refuses to engage social science tools and validate personal experiences to tell the whole, real story, complete with historic through lines that render people in the complexity they deserve.

With our fancy education, how many of us are even equipped to do so? Given the tendency to normalize the most horrific policies and practices of our society, likely not many. The news media, through uncritical tactics that fail to deeply consider fault lines, often functions as an amplifier for power, which is really a narrow sliver of our so-called audience.

More special coverage at GJR: [What is lost if photos are pulled to save subject's pain?](#)

Unlike The Daily Northwestern students, how many of us ever stop to take stock of our assumptions and make space for ideas that may challenge our orthodoxy? I admit, I cringe when I hear how people in activist circles talk about the media. I can't help but critique how wrong they get what we do and how we do it. But an expansive view would consider this a call for more news literacy because in all the confusion, audiences, even tender student-activists caught in the punishing swirl of social media and surveillance culture, are likely trying telling us we need to do better by them and the communities they represent. Though The Daily staff overreacted, this is what they were attempting. Failing to do good journalism like wisely using a student directory to make contact isn't the answer but answer, we must. And perhaps the answer is more transparency: telling and showing how we got the story and how those decisions were made?

We are all familiar with the image of a press scrum following a source up the courthouse steps, yelling questions and sticking microphones in their direction. It's such a common motif, the imagery is frequently used in TV and movie dramas to move along plot lines. This is a mere performance aspect of getting the story. Increasingly, the best journalism – the kind that offers complex, authentic, contextual stories for everyone, according to University of Georgia's Maria Len-Rios'

rubric for journalistic excellence, is the done with more deliberation over how journalists themselves show up as gatekeepers – and caretakers. Fortunately, journalism initiatives have surfaced to deal with extractive practices associated with reporting the news.

Just recently, Solutions Journalism Network, headed by David Bornstein and Tina Rosenberg of The New York Times Fixes blog, convened about 100 journalists in Utah. They've made complicating narratives, based on Amanda Ripley's [powerful essay](#), a priority by [training journalists](#) how to use conflict mediation techniques to peel back layers and get to the real motivations of people we cover. The goal is to show journalists how to ask deep questions and really listen, as if they care about more than clinching the quote or anecdote. Solutions Journalism itself seeks to implicate actors in their own narratives by showing what works in addressing social issues (local or beyond), how it works and highlighting the limits with insight and rigor.

Trabian Shorters, CEO of BMe Community, offers a [powerful tool](#) he calls "asset-framing," which defines communities and people by their aspirations, not the worst thing about them or the terrible, bad thing we relish repeating. How this can work journalistically is by pulling our own coattails when we develop and pitch stories, write, shoot and film them, then package human narratives for display.

So, when crafting a story about a marginalized community, we can pause and ask ourselves is this an "overcoming" trope? What is joy in this place? Is this a "fate" trope where we write about, say, gun violence in black and brown communities and frame the story as the inevitable result of "choice" without ever questioning the structures that provide the foundation and housing for these outcomes? Do we all have a "personal responsibility" trope in our back pockets, all worn and frayed from overuse from a lack of critical thought and inability to see the new and different in a people or an issue

we've been staring at a long, long time?

Both [Listening Post](#) and [Press On](#), a Southern movement journalism collective, also shows the critical work of bringing more humanity to this practice, as are others.

Right here in the Chicago journalism landscape, we have examples of how much we're not seeing nor listening to all of the communities we purport to serve. Journalists have shown an unwillingness catch up to conversations and analyses of, say, the violence that plagues so many of our neighbors. And where there's power in naming, we've had journalists refuse to even consider how self labeling can serve as a humanizing component of existence while we lean on responsibility narratives that further marginalize. We fall on journalistic tropes on a daily basis, offending and erasing broad swaths of people, committing a type of violence that calls for narrative reparation.

Now middle-aged and idealistic, I was once young and idealistic, fortunate to work with some of the smartest, most creative minds. A newsroom leader I'll forever cherish encouraged our niche publishing team to stretch our thinking when creating new titles to narrate the lives of people at the intersection of many fault lines – be they immigration, gender, race/ethnicity or otherwise: This person implored us to make *spectacular* mistakes as a way of growing into our full purpose and potential. The Daily Northwestern apology falls in this category: It was spectacular but not at all in the ways our unstretched minds and worn-out modes would have us believe. The apology broke us – but in the right places so they – and we – can fully commit to evolving journalism in a way that respects our audiences so they can tell the difference and repair the trust gap that has us all on edge about this thing we secretly fear is on life support.

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