

TEACHING NOTE:

From Covering Protests to Having Their Say: Racial and Cultural Shifts in American Newsrooms¹

The case centers on the first week in June 2020, when protests following the police killing of George Floyd sparked a racial reckoning not only in America but also in its most influential and traditional newsrooms. Journalists, especially journalists of color, voiced their frustration at newsroom practices they said cultivated skewed content and left them undervalued, subject to biased working conditions and lack of safety in the field. Journalists from the news side felt empowered to break down the cultural and journalistic wall between them and editorial page editors. Facing vocal opposition from their staffs, many top editors resigned or were removed from their leadership positions.

Teaching Objectives

- To familiarize students with traditional journalistic tenets and newsroom practices, and the subsequent way many of them are now being scrutinized.
- To pinpoint how journalists at various stages in their career use their voice to effect change.
- To recognize how social media and internal communication has changed newsroom culture.
- To prompt students to consider when they should support or challenge their leadership.
- To practice effective communication strategies in giving voice to values.

The case provides a window into how journalists report on their profession and comprises news articles and opinion pieces published in real time. Because the case focuses on journalism and newsroom practices, it is helpful to begin teaching it with a glossary of terms; even better, ask your students to define these terms as they understand them, stressing that you don't want a textbook definition:

- Kerner Commission Report (1968): Led by Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner Jr., the Kerner Commission and its report detailed the underlying reasons for nationwide rioting the previous year. Its chapter on the news media's failings in covering the Black community and the riots is credited for the widespread integration of newsrooms.
- Mainstream media: A term applied to general-interest news outlets whose core audiences are presumed to be white.
- Newsrooms: The real (physical and virtual) or imagined workplace where news content is conceived, written, produced and/or edited for text or broadcast.
- Objectivity: The [journalistic tenet](#) that originally referred to the practice of evidence-based reporting, not the journalist. Until recently, journalists were trained to be "objective" as a matter of identity, which many now say favored a heterosexual white patriarchal default perspective of journalism.
- Stylebooks: A handbook of terms and usages that ensure newsrooms have consistent style. While large outlets like The New York Times produce their own stylebooks for in-house use, The Associated Press Stylebook is the standard for most of the country's newsrooms.

- Commentary, reviews, opinion: Analytical content that explicitly tries to convince a news consumer to believe the writer's opinion or analysis
- Op-ed: A bylined opinion piece, usually written by someone outside the newsroom. The term originates from being opposite the newspaper's editorial.

Supporting Materials

See "Module Overview: Giving Voice to Values" for a full list of supporting materials that can be used with the case. To understand journalism as performed communication, analyze the articles discussed in the case as well as those being cited.

Assignment Questions for Students

1. Why do you think COVID-19 and the summer 2020 protests influenced newsroom journalists, especially Black journalists, to speak out in their newsrooms in ways they had not done after the Ferguson protests and other previous controversies?
2. Discuss the benefits or drawbacks of writing a present-day Kerner Commission Report.
3. Discuss the concept of "objectivity" and why it has lost its luster for many journalists. Why do you agree or disagree that the term is outdated? Which concepts could replace "objectivity"?
4. Through social media and internal corporate messaging, communication between employees is changing. In larger companies, employees have greater access to one another. How do you think this increased communication affects culture in newsrooms?
5. Many critics argue that the line between news and opinion content is blurred online. Why do you think newsroom journalists felt empowered to criticize content appearing on opinion pages even though the two desks have separate staffs?
6. One top editor defended his actions while others acknowledged missteps. They all ultimately resigned. What do you consider commonalities in their cases? Differences?
7. Why do you think advocacy at traditional newspapers got the most publicity and leverage?
8. How has reading this case study helped you perceive of your role in a newsroom?

Teaching the case

Students should be encouraged to read the news and opinion articles referred to in the introduction to provide context. Especially important are opinion pieces by Sarah Glover and Wes Lowery because they provide historical background on race and newsrooms.

It is imperative to read the actual articles and tweets that caused the newsroom agitation so students can reach their own conclusions on whether the resultant action was appropriate. In addition, an instructor can illustrate this case study with images and links of these articles and tweets.

The case study is divided into sections so that a student or group could present a deeper dive into that section for the rest of the class. In addition, the questions can be applied individually to almost all the sections for breakout discussions, or be used as stand-alone at the conclusion. One effective assignment (especially for large classes using remote software like Zoom) is to let students choose a question they want to address and group them together for a discussion and presentation that elevates a range of responses.

In fact, because the case study outlines ethical issues in news production as well as newsroom practices, its questions are designed to sidestep simple answers. As long as students support their responses with evidence-based critical thinking, expect their answers to represent a spectrum of ideas.

1. Why do you think COVID-19 and the summer 2020 protests influenced newsroom journalists, especially Black journalists, to speak out in their newsrooms in ways they had not done after the Ferguson protests and other previous controversies?

Answers likely will center on the pandemic's pervasive devastation, especially for communities of color; the way George Floyd was murdered; the videotaping of his death and that video's spread through social media and mass communication; and the widespread protests.

2. Discuss the benefits or drawbacks of writing a present-day Kerner Commission Report.

This question requires historical digging, but students should debate the ultimate effectiveness of the 1968 report and whether today's news industry has the resources to be as transformative in terms of diversity.

3. Discuss the concept of "objectivity" and why it has lost its luster for many journalists. Why do you agree or disagree that the term is outdated? Which concepts could replace "objectivity"?

Many journalists, especially those from underrepresented communities, see objectivity (which is defined earlier in this teaching note) as a tool of white patriarchal systems, like the American news industry. However, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, the two white male authors of the influential book "Elements of Journalism" (Crown: New York, 2021) argue that the term is misunderstood and deals more with transparency than a lack of bias. Black journalist Wes Lowery² prefers the term "moral clarity," which has led to its own extensive debate among journalists (available online from many sources). Your students might produce an array of concepts – for instance, being "fair" or "fully dimensional" – they see as more useful terminology.

4. Through social media and internal corporate messaging, communication between employees is changing. In larger companies, employees have greater access to one another. How do you think this increased communication affects culture in newsrooms?

The journalists in this case used Slack and other internal communication tools to protest newsroom actions and leadership. While not noted in the case, some journalists say these channels had previously been used to criticize or internally "shame" co-workers' work. Students might want to relate how their own use of these tools has affected their lives in various situations: in classes, dorms, etc.

5. Many critics argue that the line between news and opinion content is blurred online. Why do you think newsroom journalists felt empowered to criticize content appearing on opinion pages even though the two desks have separate staffs?

One reason journalists in the news departments have become more concerned about what is produced on their publications' opinion pages is that Media Insight Project³ and Pew⁴ surveys show that many people reading online can't distinguish opinion content from news content. In addition, opinion pages (including columns and op-eds) are often among the best-viewed pages for publications, making their content more visible than news articles.

6. One top editor defended his actions while others acknowledged missteps. They all ultimately resigned. What do you consider commonalities in their cases? Differences?

Students can reach their own conclusions here, comparing those editors who seemed more empathetic to their newsrooms to those who were not. In addition, students could look at the age of the leaders, their actual job titles and their publications.

7. Why do you think advocacy at traditional newspapers got the most publicity and leverage?

Even as circulation diminishes, traditional news publications play a crucial cultural role in their communities. Students could discuss their own local news outlets – television, digital, print – as well as the continued significance of such prestigious publications as The New York Times. The lowest-ranked person to leave his job in this case was The Times' Opinion editor.

8. How has reading this case helped you perceive of your role in a newsroom?

Among many ways they could address this question, students might discuss if they think journalists have a higher moral obligation than most workers because they produce news; the values they think are worth protesting for; and the ways in which they should act as followers and leaders.

¹ This teaching note was written by Dr. Kathleen McElroy for the purposes of facilitating discussion of the case study "From Covering Protests to Having Their Say."

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/23/opinion/objectivity-black-journalists-coronavirus.html>

³ <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/americans-and-the-news-media/>

⁴ <http://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2018/06/18/distinguishing-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>