

On #BlackLivesMatter and Journalism

Sarah J. Jackson*

Submitted: July 30, 2020 – Accepted: August 1, 2020 – Published: September 18, 2020

Abstract

In this refined version of a 2020 talk given to journalism students at Duke University, Professor Sarah Jackson reflects on the newsroom controversies and tensions that have accompanied the rise of #BlackLivesMatter. She argues that normative news values have always been at least partially subservient to the larger values of society, which means that, in the United States at the very least they are unavoidably and structurally racist even as they simultaneously represent real efforts on behalf of an occupational group to enact values that help democracy function properly. Jackson's goal in this powerful piece is for journalists to be more self-reflective about the manner by which their professional efforts can harm particular people and groups even while it purports to benefit society at large.

Keywords: #Blacklivesmatter; political protest; Civil Rights Movement; newsrooms; values.

* Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania (United States);
✉ sarah.jackson@asc.upenn.edu

1 Historical Background¹

Like potentially many people in this room I had initially hoped to work as a professional journalist, and in fact did a little of that at various points in my life. I ended up going the academic route because it turned out I was more interested in the question of interrogating the power of stories, and the power of journalism, and who gets to tell those stories and whose voices are included in terms of shaping culture and politics. And that's part of what got me to where I am in terms of my academic career — really having a lot of these questions very early on about the cultural, and political, and social power of journalism and journalists telling some stories and not telling other stories — and telling some stories well and not telling other stories so well.

With that, I'm going to jump into a little background. I wanted to make sure that we're all on the same page in terms of some of the basic scholarship about the history of recent journalism. And so I'm going to talk a little bit about that before jumping into this contemporary moment and talking about what things look like now and what the best journalistic practices might even look like for the current moment. In terms of history, we know that just like other institution in the United States, that the field and institutions of journalism that initially existed in this country were those engaged in the planned and organized exclusion and demonization of Black voices. And when I say this to people, I think they often feel like, "Oh, I can't believe you're saying this about my institution that I work in," but we have gotten to a point where I think we can honestly accept that the United States was founded on ideologies that very specifically were white supremacist ideologies. And therefore, a byproduct of that is the simple fact that many of our institutions, from our universities to our journalistic institutions, to our political institutions and many others, just assumed that it was normal and natural to exclude certain stories and/or to stereotype and demean certain groups.

There has been a lot of scholarship about how that has and hasn't shifted over time. But I think for me and in my work, one of the things that's really important is that even though it's important for us to acknowledge that history and acknowledge the exclusions and the harms that that history has caused in the field of journalism and in media in particular, we also need to uplift and know that there are examples in which, even at time periods when people tend to say, "Well, that was just the culture. That's just how it was done," there were always people pushing back against this. And we can see that pushback in any historical time period. My first book was about the Black press. You can see that African Americans, even before the abolition of slavery, were pushing back about how they were being represented in the media. And so for example, the first Black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, which was founded in 1827, was founded by two free African American citizens in New York City. And their opening editorial said, "Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations of things which concern us dearly. From the press and the pulpit we have suffered much by being incorrectly represented." And so, the goal of this paper was to correct some of the representations of Black Americans.

Similarly, just this year, 2020, Ida B. Wells was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize, but at the turn of the twentieth century, the journalism that Ida B. Wells was doggedly doing to tell stories about lynching, the violence of lynching and the heinous and prolific phenomenon that was lynching, was really significant in helping to set the stage for eventually passing anti-lynching legislation in the United States. Wells shone light on these stories that the mainstream,

1. This is the transcript of a talk given by Sarah J. Jackson, Presidential Associate Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, to journalism students affiliated with Duke University's DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy on July 1, 2020. This talk was given over Zoom and the transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.

white press was either ignoring or often justifying. We could go through any moment of history and see that there's always been Black folks who have said, "Wait a second. There are these stories that are being left out. There are these representations that are problematic." And what history shows us is that those people were right. The folks who were agitating from within a journalistic practice to say, "Hey. What about this group? What about this idea? Why aren't we covering this story? Why are we always framing it this way? Why do we always depend on these sources?" As history then remembers them, it turns out that their pushes for more just and inclusive journalism are the ones we look back on as the heroic story. I think that's something interesting for us to hold as we think about the current moment as well.

I want to say something also before we get up to the present about the civil rights era as well. I know that when I was in journalism school, one of the things that I learned was this kind of heroic narrative of the role journalists played in the civil rights movement, which was that many Americans were changed by journalism of the period, sort of the hearts and minds argument, when they saw the brutality that was happening on the streets in the South around desegregation protests. They saw the German Shepherds being sicced on children and the water hoses and all that. And there's this argument that this journalistic coverage, and especially the photo journalism and the visual images that people saw on the nightly news, really helped to change and influence folks all the way up to president John F. Kennedy about the real brutality that Black civil rights protesters were experiencing in response to their organizing in the South in the 1950s and 1960s.

That's true, to an extent. But one thing that gets left out of that story that I think is really important for journalists to be self-reflexive about is that while sometimes that was true, there was still an overwhelming and very problematic representation of Black people and Black activism at the core of U.S. journalism. It's a myopic fairy tale to say that journalists were always on the right side of these issues. In fact, if you go back and you look at the journalism at the time, many, many media outlets actually demonized the civil rights movement, demonized Martin Luther King, Jr., argued that their demands were too radical, argued that they should go slower, represented them through conflict frames that really made it seem as if they were on equal footing with the armed police that they were facing during these protests. And that actually sounds similar to some of what we might see from media today.

Later on, in the post-civil rights era, we certainly saw great progress in terms of the integration of newsrooms and of media and a greater diversity of voices. And that is something that is often celebrated. And I think it's important to celebrate that because it's real. But once again, we still need to hold space for the nuance that often that integration wasn't enough, that it stagnated and didn't necessarily change the whiteness of journalistic institutions, that it was often just tokenized voices without more holistic change. Black journalists, post-civil rights era, still faced enormous challenges in doing their jobs in terms of being limited to covering only certain types of stories, covering crime stories, covering sports stories, for example, and not being taken seriously as journalists that could cover things like politics. Add that in that era, we saw several decades of backlash against the progress of the civil rights movement, for example during the Reagan era in the 1980s, where we saw the media and journalists really pick up and spread some of what has come to be understood as really harmful propaganda about Black communities. That includes the stereotype of the welfare queen, that the majority of coverage of Black communities was about crime and conflict, the exclusion of African American stories from public interest news and from mainstream political news unless it was about racial conflict. This is an interesting conundrum because, of course, what we also see, very much so in the 1980s and 1990s, is the holding up by media-makers of supposedly "exceptional" African

Americans like Michael Jackson or Michael Jordan as evidence that we'd overcome racial prejudice and didn't need ongoing policy efforts to ameliorate racism. Again, this probably sounds familiar.

2 Journalism Today and Black Lives Matter

I offer all that background to say that these aren't new issues. This issue of diversity and inclusion in journalism as a profession isn't a new issue. And this question of how are African American communities represented isn't a new issue. The question of how does Black activism and protest around racial justice get represented in news is not a new issue. But I think it's promising we are talking about these questions more openly now than any other time I can recall in my life. In the next section of this talk I want to address where we are in this current moment in history. One of the things that I think is really fascinating about the current moment is that we have hit a moment in media culture, where what we saw was... do you remember when Obama was running for president? It may be hard to believe today, but when Obama was running for president and when Obama was elected president, there was all this chatter in the media about how America was now "post-racial." And this word post-racial came out of nowhere. And it was like, "Now that enough of the American public will vote for a Black man to be president, we've overcome race." Whatever that means. There was this really strong idealistic discourse in journalism that somehow the white supremacist impulses of much of the country had been erased by the fact that we had a Black president. What we know, of course, is that that was really this exceptionalism framing — tokenism — that allowed the racial status quo in America to go unchallenged, that just like in the '80s and '90s one person's success is not how to honestly measure inequality or people's lived experiences.

What has been really interesting for me to watch as an observer and somebody who studies media is to watch the same journalists who were, in the Obama era, uncritically taking up this narrative about post-racialism, and about racial progress, and about how far we've come — well now, in the wake of the Trump election, and the not just national but global rise of far right and racist political ideology, they seemed to be taken by surprise. Part of that surprise was because of accepting the story that they themselves were telling about America being "post-race." There has been a lot of hand-wringing about how political commentators, and opinion editors and all these media people got 2016 so wrong. Everybody expected something different to happen. And I really think that part of that had to do with the fact of this sort of myopic racial exceptionalism narrative that people allowed themselves to believe about Obama.

Clearly, we now know that that's not true and we're not post-race. It's frankly laughable. I don't think there's any question at this point that that is any longer something that people can rationally think. And so what we've seen then, I would say in the last decade or so, is something really interesting has happened because progress, of course, has continued to happen in newsrooms, in national conversations about race and racism, in social justice spaces. We've seen an increasing power of members of underrepresented groups in newsrooms. We've seen more and more folks like Nikole Hannah-Jones at *The New York Times*, who has risen to a point in her career where she's able to organize an entire issue of *The New York Times* magazine about the centrality of slavery to American experience. We see people like Yamiche Alcindor, who is a White House correspondent doing really great political coverage, when historically we didn't see many Black women even being given the option to seriously cover politics or the White House in that way. So of course, we continue to see progress. And one of the results of this progress is that Black media-makers and Black journalists have been asking their outlets, and

their colleagues, and the rest of the American public to really continue grappling with the question of race, and race inequality, and racism.

They've actually been doing this for a very long time. And in some cases, we've found out, editors have silenced these journalists, asked them to change the force of their arguments or angles of their stories. Recently, we saw a whole group of young *New York Times* staffers on the news side come out publicly in response to the decision to run the Tom Cotton editorial and say, "Hey. We were told we weren't allowed to critique the editorial side, even when they ran things about race that were harmful to us, but, we're not going to be silent anymore." But the blowback they faced for speaking the truth was also real. And so that reflects how, as more Black journalists rise to acclaim, these journalists are still facing some of the same limitations and assumptions. A lot of that has to do with the ongoing assumption in the news business that the target audience of U.S. news is a white, middle America, conservative kind of news consumer, which in and of itself flies in the face of what we know about the increasing diversity of U.S. news consumers.

All that to say one of the things that we're seeing then in this moment with the rise of visibility of Black Lives Matter is that, this didn't just happen in 2020; and in fact it didn't just happen in 2014 when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri. It started in 2013 when George Zimmerman was acquitted for killing Trayvon Martin. That was the first time that the phrase "Black Lives Matter" was used online, but of course Black communities have been organizing against state violence long before that. One of the things I think is really crucial for journalists to understand and do is contextualize this movement, which is to say the Black Lives Matter movement isn't a standalone racial justice movement any more than say the Me Too movement is a standalone feminist movement. There were feminist campaigns and organized movements way before we ever heard of Me Too, just like there were racial justice movements and organizing way before we heard of Black Lives Matter. And so, one of the things that's really important is for journalists to be self-reflexive enough to look back and say, "Okay, how did we cover the civil rights movement? What mistakes did we make? And how can we do better in covering Black Lives Matter? How did we cover the Black Panther Party? What mistakes did we make? How did we cover Black activism in the 1990s, what can we do better?"

Let me tell you, there were a lot of mistakes. How can we do better in covering Black Lives Matter? We have examples of this happening before. There might have been a different name to what was happening, but we have examples of the really important role that journalists can play in either helping the U.S. public make sense of the really complicated and nuanced issues at play here, or falling back onto certain assumptions that frankly are based on racial stereotypes about Black conflict, and about urban disorder and many other things.

Because I think this is so important I want to finish by sharing some best practices. I'm sure these aren't the only best practices, but they're the ones that came to mind most for me, given what I've studied for a long time.

3 Journalistic Values and Newsroom Best Practices

Start from a place of not just praising journalism, which we should because journalism is important to democracy and we desperately need it to continue doing its job, but we also need for journalists and journalism institutions to acknowledge where harm has been done. There are some local papers that have started to do this. For example, in Montgomery, Alabama, the *Montgomery Advertiser's* editorial board apologized publicly for what it called its "shameful" and "careless" coverage of white mob violence that justified and normalized lynching from the

1870s through the 1950s. That's an 80-year period of being complicit in the extra-judicial murder of Black Alabama citizens! That might seem like an extreme example, though it's more common than you might think, but papers all over the country outside of the South have been complicit in villainizing African Americans in various ways and with harmful results. For journalists, and editors and outlets to really come to an honest reckoning with their role, both the good and bad, that is a first step.

Next, it's important for journalists to question how we understand and how we've been taught to understand the concept of objectivity. There was just a great piece in the *New Yorker* recently by Masha Gessen about this — her argument is that in the contemporary media environment many people have confused the ideal of objectivity with sort of a both-siderism, which ultimately lacks what journalist Wesley Lowery calls “moral clarity.” Objectivity is not giving equal time to both sides even if one side is violating truth, morals, and the social contract. In this “both-siderism,” if we interview people who say that systemic racism is a continued social issue, well then, the bad argument goes that we then need to have someone on that says, “There's no more racism. And actually, black people are better off than white people now.” But that is not objectivity. Objectivity as a concept has unfortunately been used to mask assumptions within the journalism industry that protect whiteness, but ideally objectivity is reporting the facts, the truth, with what the Kerner Commission called “compassion and depth.” There is no need to report misinformation and disinformation or every bad argument out there as if it should be weighed alongside the actual answers we have to questions about how inequality works. A good journalist offers context that helps the public understand that not all claims should be given the same weight. We have some really great examples of what that looks like. What's valuable here is the kind of contextualization that the norms of truth and moral clarity call for: not just uncritically recording what members of the establishment or those in power say, but offering context, seeking out sources with less power as well, checking to see what the data says, etc.

Here we see a third best practice emerging, which is in how journalists think about sources. For instance, think about using police as sources. Historically, journalists have worked really hard to maintain relationships with elite sources. There's a certain set of sources that are considered to be the sources you want to have in your pocket, you want to be able to call, and they include politicians, and corporate insiders, and police, because these are the people that, for example, if you have a crime beat at your newspaper, you want the police to be friendly with you and let you know when things are going on so you can report them. But one of the problems with that is that in many cases, these relationships have been too close. And these sources are treated as if their narrative and their version of the story is more reliable and more honest than the versions of the story that come from citizens. What we've seen over and over again in these police brutality cases is that often the first reporting, the first narrative that the police report to journalists and the public is just fundamentally untrue. The videos have shown us that. They said that so-and-so was resisting arrest when he wasn't. They said that so-and-so had a gun when she didn't. We know now that the police can be faulty sources and that they have a reason to protect themselves and each other. That doesn't mean don't use them as sources, that means use them as sources but also use witnesses as legitimate sources, community members as legitimate sources, activists and social workers as legitimate sources.

I mentioned the Kerner Commission earlier. In 1968 when the country erupted in unrest following the assassination of Martin Luther King, president Lyndon Johnson had put together the Kerner Commission, which was meant to investigate the reasons for civil unrest and try to prevent it in the future. The Kerner Commission came back with all these reasons

for Black uprisings that would sound very familiar today: disenfranchisement from voting, poverty, joblessness, homelessness, all these things that are still social issues today. But one of the striking things the Kerner Commission said was that, in fact, a lot of this unrest was the responsibility of journalists because Black communities felt that they weren't being heard and that their stories weren't told unless they did something that fit into some kind of narrative about Black criminality or conflict. And so the Kerner Commission said, "Along with the country as a whole, the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and a white perspective. That is no longer good enough. The painful process of readjustment that is required of the American news media must begin now. They must make a reality of integration — in both their product and personnel. They must insist on the highest standards of accuracy — not only reporting single events with care and skepticism, but placing each event into meaningful perspective. They must report the travail of our cities with compassion and depth." In this moment, we can heed the same call, this question of compassion and depth. You can report professionally and still treat people and their stories and their communities with compassion and depth, don't just swoop in and swoop out without knowing anything about the community, don't ignore community members, instead take into consideration their histories and pain, think about how media coverage might negatively affect folks as you're reporting on them and their experiences and about how to do better.

Those are three best practices. Another best practice is that white journalists should stand with their Black colleagues. As I mentioned earlier, it's the case that Black journalists, for generations, have been pushing these issues and have been trying to make some change about language in newsrooms, about sensationalism, about framing, about the exclusion of certain sources and the reliance on other sources. But at the same time, the folks who have been doing this have not always had the most welcoming or friendly environment and culture within these institutions. But collectively, with solidarity, news staff can push to make sure that news orgs are practicing what they preach, that they have fair hiring and promotion practices, that they have an environment and culture that's welcoming to everyone. Continuing to stand with Black journalists and other journalists of color will make a difference in terms of who gets to tell us these stories and under what conditions.

Fifth: especially in covering activism, reject individualistic narratives that ignore collective organizing. What I mean by this is that one of the critiques that is often justifiably made of journalists in their retrospective coverage of the civil rights era is that they spend a lot of time focusing on and telling stories of individuals, which is why we all know Martin Luther King and we all know Rosa Parks. But part of the problem with that sort of framing of these stories is that it ignores that it was thousands of ordinary people who were organizing for change and whose voices were being reflected in those demands. So many regular people risked their lives for the right to vote and for desegregation that it's a real shame we don't have a better collective understanding of how activism works. Similarly, I would say in this moment, while it might be tempting and there might be compelling figures to tell stories about, it's important to know how these figures fit into the larger space in which these events are occurring. These stories aren't just about one case of police brutality, or one police officer, or one victim of police brutality, or one organizer, although those organizers I think their stories are important to tell and they make good sources, but it's in fact about communities, and those communities have deep collective histories and members of those communities have been organizing and reacting for a long time. I was recently in conversation with Alicia Garza, who people often refer to as a "founder" of the Black Lives Matter movement, and I myself made the mistake of referring to her that way. She immediately corrected me that she is a "co-creator" of the Black Lives Matter

Global Network, which is a specific organization, and an organizer in many capacities, but that she sees herself as part of a legacy and community of Black activism that is much bigger than just this moment. It's important to tell this history and holistic story.

And last. Is this part of my fifth point or a sixth one? You decide. So much of the way that journalists have been trained to cover activism and social movements is through the lens of crime. Many of the conventions of covering crime or covering conflict migrate to the coverage of social movements: "Disruption to the social order is bad. Who is on this side? Who is on that side? Was it a scuffle? What sensational happened? Ooooh look a photo of something on fire." A lot of the sort of, "If it bleeds, it leads logic," is applied to coverage of activism and protest. We know this approach isn't even useful for covering a crime, but it's *certainly* not useful for covering social movements, because what that approach does is it tends to erase and make invisible social issues and their solutions. It erases why people are collectively doing what they're doing by focusing on sensational images or individual actors. It really fails to inform the American public about what is at root in social movements, which is in fact questions of democracy and American progress. Social movements are about progress, activism is about demanding change that theoretically will make us better, right? Why do we cover it like crime? If we're going to understand how change happens in a society, we have to understand the roots of why people are demanding change. If we're so focused on a building burning or an individual story that we can't tell the story that answers the questions, "Why are there 10,000 people in the streets, and what have their experiences been? What is the history here? What are their demands? What is the social context?" we really fail to give people the information they need to make informed decisions about whether to support or not support a movement, about whether they think change needs to happen, about how progress works.

I see this as crucially important in thinking about the ideal of democracy itself. Journalists are crucial to democracy, but their crucialness lies in telling stories with nuance, with depth, holistically, and not falling into shortcuts, or stereotypes, or overly simplistic frames or sensationalism. That's the value of journalism to democracy. And with that, I'll close.

Sarah J. Jackson: Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania (United States) ✉ sarah.jackson@asc.upenn.edu; 🌐 <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/people/faculty/sarah-j-jackson-phd>
Sarah J. Jackson studies how media, journalism, and technology are used by and represent marginalized publics, with a focus on how communication arising from Black, feminist, and activist communities contribute to US progress. Her first book, *Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press* (Routledge, 2014), examines the relationship between Black celebrity activism, journalism, and American politics. Her co-authored second book, *Hashtag Activism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (MIT Press, 2020), focuses on the use of Twitter in contemporary social movements. As a 2020 Andrew Carnegie Fellow, she is working on a third book on the political power and industry innovation of African American media-makers. She is an associate editor of *Communication Theory* and serves on the advisory boards of the Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies and the Social Science Research Council's MediaWell initiative.