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THE PHILOSOPHER AS JOURNALIST:
A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO TRUTH

The sequence of stories evolved with a karmic sense of perfect timing. I was preparing a newsroom seminar for reporters and editors at the *Louisville (KY) Courier-Journal*, where I worked for a three-month stint as reporter and ethics coach. The seminar topic: Truth.

The first in the unplanned series was a front-page story. A couple of dozen 14–20-year-olds were arrested on various charges related to the production of false IDs. These were middle-class suburban kids intent on buying alcohol who



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supported a counterfeit production system to do it. Principals, parents, and arrested youth were quoted in the story that detailed the law enforcement sting operation. No underage person was identified.

A few days later, again a front-page story. This report told the story of the consequences for the arrested teens. With a reporter and parents following, they spent a day at the county jail and got a stern lecture from the judge. The judge let them off easy this time; he counseled, and there would be no record. He certainly hoped that the day's experience had them "Scared Straight." A photograph caught the teens in the courtroom, shot from behind to avoid identification. A couple of them told reporters that the experience was awful and the jail was worse than they expected.

The next day, a new wrinkle appeared. Inner-city leaders complained that if it had been *their* kids arrested rather than the white suburban kids, there surely would have been charges and records. And, on top of it, these leaders complained, everyone knew that the "Scared Straight" techniques were controversial at best. It was not likely that they did any good. And the reporter found national experts on juvenile crime who backed up these claims. Inner-city and suburban teens are treated differently when suspected of criminal activity. And, there seemed to be little evidence that the tactics used with the Louisville youth would do any good.

The next day, the final story in this sequence, the paper delivered a story of a teen arrested at a local rock concert for buying beer with a fake ID. The girl, identified this time, was part of the original group arrested and put through the "Scared Straight" routine. She cautioned the reporter against drawing conclusions regarding the success of the program based on her personal failure.

With the eager cooperation of the reporter who wrote this series of stories, we dissected the published accounts and discussed questions of truth. The journalists treated the series as a philosophical puzzle. Each story seemed accurate, but somehow, the truth that was told kept changing. Was this a story of suburban kids who got caught doing what suburban kids do everywhere? Well, yes. But it was also a story of privilege that comes with class and color. And it was a story about a popular but ineffective technique for keeping kids out of trouble. And it was a story of recidivism as well. The reporters and editors agreed that not one of those different renditions of the emerging story could have been told sooner.

The epistemology of journalism is different from the development of more static scientific knowledge. Rather than producing reproducible results as does the scientist, the journalist publishes a snapshot in a series of evolving narratives, each having some slice of the truth. Journalistic practice implicitly rejects idealist or rationalist ideas of the search for knowledge as bound to a solid, objective foundation. It rejects the notion of the learner or reporter as that of non-intrusive observer. Yet the function of journalism, as reflected in accepted codes of ethics and standards for practice, according to all but the most philosophically inclined, is the search for and the telling of the truth.

Here I will explicate the notion of truth implicit in print and broadcast news reporting and clarify the journalistic responsibility to choose the stories to be told under the guise of news and to choose the perspective of the telling.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors devotes one article in its "Statement of Principles" to truth and accuracy. Article IV tells us:

Good faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly. Editorials, analytical articles and commentary should be held to the same standards of accuracy with respect to the facts as news reports. Significant errors of fact, as well as errors of omission, should be corrected promptly and prominently.¹

The Associated Press Managing Editors states the truth-related responsibility of news organizations more succinctly: "The good newspaper is fair, accurate, honest, responsible, independent and decent. Truth is its guiding principle."² The Society of Professional Journalists says that journalists should "Seek Truth and Report It."³ The Radio-Television News Directors Association explains, "The responsibility of radio and television journalists is to gather and report information of importance and interest to the public accurately, honestly and impartially."⁴

The notions of reporting accurately and reporting the truth described in the codes and taught in journalism schools rest on the assumption that news is external, existing as a flower might in a meadow, waiting to be noticed and picked. But, as the *Courier-Journal* stories illustrate, the truths of the news story are rather created by the combined perspectives of the reporter, the photographer, the editors, and other gatekeepers who fashion the published story. While news as creation is seemingly obvious, journalists and consumers alike seem uncomfortable that editorial judgment rather than external reality serves as the basis for what gets reported as news. Rather than view the journalist as an objective spectator and conduit, I describe the reporting process as one of professional perspective with the resulting story as the product of that perspective.

The methods that go into determining which truths get reported and which do not are methods rooted in conventional practice. They are methods that evolved for the most pragmatic of reasons: They are the ones that work.

Journalists begin the assessment of a potential story by wondering if the story would be meaningful or important to a significant share of the audience. If the answer is affirmative, research begins.

As little is often known about the specifics at this stage, whether the story is worth researching will depend on how closely it seems to match conventional genre. Is it a story about how well government is doing its job? Is it a story that informs the audience about some occurrence that may affect their lives or the lives of others? Is it a story about a brave individual in conflict with forces of nature or illness? Is it a story of an individual's bad deeds and the community's response? Is it a story with unexpected characters, context, or turn of events? These are the basic categories of events and issues that become the news.

Journalistic research includes examination of documents and search for historical connection, but it turns on the use of human sources. Journalists report what people say. The people who are used as the vehicles for development of the story include those involved with the experience and credible experts who can provide perspective for the event or issue under examination. Who is chosen, which voices are ignored, have a clear affect on the journalist's perspective and the resulting published report.

Then, from the combination of interviews and gathered bits of data, journalists weave a coherent narrative, all from the perspective of what the audience needs or most wants to know. Journalism educators John Merrill and Jack Odell describe the final selection process this way:

The reporter never selects all the potential truth; he or she leaves much of it, or most of it, unselected and thus unreported, but does get some of it. And it is this "some" that we are referring to as . . . the selected truth. This is what forms the core of the journalistic news story. It is this selected portion of the truth that the reporter weaves into subjective patterns, calling the final product "news." At this level of truth the journalist selects from the potential truth certain things which may actually be used in the story. The journalist never really does use all of this selected truth in the story, but theoretically all of it could be used.⁵

When working as a reporter/ethics coach at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in the mid-1980s, I was given the not-exciting assignment of writing a story about Temple University's third heart transplant. The news element that appealed to my editors was clear. The procedure was still unusual. An individual, a man in his early thirties in this case, was saved from death by a medical miracle. The sources were equally obvious: the patient and his family, the doctors or hospital spokesperson, and a few paragraphs full of information about how heart transplants were giving the promise of full life spans to those who would otherwise die young.

I chose not to work this story within the expected categories. I searched for an angle that might make this story a vehicle for helping the audience and policy makers understand a context larger than this particular event.

I asked the patient, family, and friends where the money came from to fund the procedure. Answer: bake sales and other community fund-raising events.

I asked health care workers and hospital administrators why the cost for the transplant was so high. Answer: The technology and personnel required to perform these delicate operations were very expensive. The procedures cost several tens of thousands of dollars or hundreds of thousands of dollars because the hospital had to be paid back for its costs.

I asked insurance companies that didn't cover these procedures why they didn't. Answer: They considered the surgery still experimental.

I asked transplant coordinators and donor bank administrators what happened to the otherwise qualified patients who couldn't raise enough money. Answer: They died.

Looking at a story likely to become a small report on an inside page from a perspective different from what was expected created a major front-page story on de facto rationing. Both approaches would have revealed "truths." But, it is journalistic perspective that determines which truths are most important.

Delighted as I was with the story's play and the positive comments of my colleagues, I found that I had underestimated the nature of public response. The transplant story generated far less comment than a story I had written less than half its size that told of the birth of an Indian rhino at the local zoo.

My foray into broadcast news convinced me that television reporting is meant to provide truths different in kind from those reported in the daily newspaper.

When I was writing for newspapers, I found myself wondering, "What do my readers need to know to make this particular event or issue meaningful to them? How can I make this relevant to the largest possible audience?" Now, reporting a story for the evening news, I found myself wondering, "If my viewers were here, what would they notice visually? If they had a chance to ask one or two quick questions, what would they most want to know?"

The conventional limitations of the usual local news program include short story packages (between one minute, thirty seconds and two minutes, fifteen seconds in length) and depend on strong visuals to move the story along. Conventional wisdom dictates that the reporter do the final stand-up, the concluding comment at the end of the story, at the scene of the event. Because visuals and taped interviews are gathered at the beginning of the research process, these concluding comments are often taped hours before the story is actually put together in broadcast form. The result is that the broadcast reporter's concluding comment, which should correspond to the print reporter's "nut graph" (a paragraph at the beginning of the story that sums it up for the reader), is usually vague and contains only that information that is patently obvious.

The kind of knowledge offered by television news is thus importantly different from that offered by a newspaper. Television news offers vicarious experience through its reporters; print news offers contextual meaning. Both products require journalistic perspective, but the intended end products are not the same. Some suggest that the divergence is narrowing as print news seeks to provide more experiential details and television news provides sound bites long enough to include argument rather than simple observations. While it is possible for newspapers to be livelier and still provide their kind of truth, and while it is possible for television news programs to be deeper and more thoughtful and still provide their kind of truth, one need not substitute for the other. Members of the audience, if they are to make informed decisions regarding their self-governance, need both kinds of knowledge. Seeing and hearing events and interviews provides something like first-hand experience; receiving context for specific events and issues provides a rationalistic background for understanding.

The epistemic choices are important to notice because of their differences from those that produce the more common static, objective notion of truth. These journalistic choices have ethical importance as well. Choosing to focus on one element of a story at the expense of another determines how the audience will understand the story and how the story subject will be portrayed.

C. Delores Tucker, a sixty-eight-year-old former secretary of state for Pennsylvania, provides a case in point for how journalistic choices can cloud the truth to the detriment of a story and its subject. Ms. Tucker, beginning in 1993, became an outspoken critic of the pornographic and drug-oriented misogynistic lyrics found in "gangsta rap." She brought to her leadership a trail of awards and recognitions for more than thirty years of work on behalf of black youth and African Americans. Tucker received support for her efforts to stop production and distribution of gangsta rap music, including support from William

Bennett, former U.S. secretary of education, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman, presidential candidate Robert Dole, and General Colin Powell.

In 1996, the now-deceased gangsta rap vocalist Tupac Shakur released an album, *All Eyez on Me*, with the song, "How Do You Want It," that included the following: Delores Tucker, you's a muthaf-----, instead of tryin' to help a nigga, you destroy a brotha." In another song on the same album, a track, "Wonda Why they Call B" included the following: "Got your legs up trying to get rich. Keep your head up and legs closed Dear Ms. Delores Tucker."

Following the release of the album and other events that Ms. Tucker found threatening, she filed suit July 21, 1997, for intentional infliction of emotional distress, slander, and invasion of privacy. In what is considered by lawyers to be a usual addition to suits claiming emotional distress, Mr. Tucker, who is 70 years old, claimed that he "as a result of his wife's injuries, suffered a loss of advice, companionship and consortium."

Reports of that complaint over the next month included many that included the erroneous claim that Ms. Tucker had sued because the lyrics ruined her sex life. A headline on the front page of the *Philadelphia News* read, "Suit vs. Shakur estate says 'vile' lyrics ruined her rep—and her sex life."

The *Los Angeles Times* reported in the second paragraph of its story, "Among other things, the lawsuit says, the anguish caused by those lyrics cut down on her sex life with her husband."

The Associated Press sent out on its wire a story with the following lead, "One of America's most outspoken foes of gangsta rap says Tupac Shakur's crude lyrics about her have wrecked her sex life."

From Grapevine in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, "The last and perhaps most inane complaint is from anti-rap activist C. Delores Tucker, who is suing for \$10 million. Tucker claims that she and her husband haven't been able to have sex in more than two years because of derogatory references to her on Shakur's 1995 album, *All Eyez on Me*."

While "lack of consortium" can mean loss of sexual relations, sex and consortium are not synonymous. No claim is made regarding the Tuckers' sex life. Yet, the idea that Tucker was claiming that the lyrics damaged her sex life took on a life of its own, resulting in the publication of this claim by more than 100 news organizations.

Sometimes news organizations cause harm that is justified by the careful use of journalistic perspective to present important snapshots of truth to an audience that needs that information for self-governance. Too often, stories like these regarding Delores Tucker sacrifice the truth for the sensational. Rather than news, such reports should carry the disclaimer used in newspaper hoaxes from the nineteenth century, "Interesting if true."

NOTES

1. American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1975
2. Associated Press Managing Editors, 1994
3. Society of Professional Journalists, 1996