

# THE MIFM FROM SOME WHERE

Undoing the  
Myth of  
Journalistic  
Objectivity

LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE

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## INTRODUCTION

Ten days after Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017, I adjusted my tie inside the unisex bathroom at an Au Bon Pain in Midtown Manhattan, messed with my salt-and-pepper hair (I was thirty-three, but my job doing daily news was aging me quickly), and tucked a cigarette behind my ear. I was walking the path of so many journalists before me, on my way to get fired. Fifteen minutes later, I calmly hung my coat over a cheap metal chair at a bistro on Lexington Avenue where I was meeting the chief executive of American Public Media's *Marketplace*, the national radio show where I'd worked as an on-air journalist for the past eight months. I sat down next to the show's VP, Deborah Clark, while a woman from HR perched nervously across the table. I had told myself I wouldn't cry or even flinch.

I knew Clark was firing me because of a blog post I'd written the previous week, questioning the role of "objectivity" in journalism. After posting it to my personal Medium blog, I'd gotten a call from the higher-ups in Los Angeles, asking me not to come in the next day. Initially I took the blog post down. But then, overwhelmed with a sense of urgency, I changed my mind, reposted it, sent a long explanatory email to *Marketplace* management, and waited. An email on Friday afternoon let me know I'd be meeting the boss Monday morning.

That weekend felt unreal, in my life and in the country: the new

president, Donald J. Trump, had just introduced the so-called Muslim ban, and people rushed to airports around the country to protest. I was out interviewing people as the crowds gathered at La Guardia, and later watched people dance in the streets when a federal court paused the ban with an injunction.

The previous weekend had been wild, too. I had taken the bus to DC, seen the middling crowds for the inauguration of the forty-fifth president of the United States and the huge crowds for the Women's March, stopping up the streets. But Trump insisted, on his first full day as president, that his had been the biggest crowd ever at an inauguration. Sean Spicer, his press secretary, pushed the point. The Sunday morning after the giant march on Washington, Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway was asked on national television about the aerial photos showing far more people at Obama's 2009 inauguration than Trump's in 2017. She said the administration was just offering "alternative facts." I came back to work early Monday to reruns of that clip: "alternative facts" had entered the lexicon.

My mind was churning with fear about how journalists would face this new reality. On my blog a few days later, I suggested that maybe the best response to "alternative facts" was not to keep doing exactly what we had been doing last week, and the week before, and five years ago.

The post was titled "Objectivity Is Dead, and I'm Okay with It." I wrote about my experience as a transgender journalist, never neutral on the subject of my own humanity and rights, even as they were being debated in "both sides" journalism. I suggested that rather than pretending there is no "why" to what we do as journalists, we should claim our values, standing firmly against those who propose to chip away at free speech, civil rights, and government transparency. How else could we help hold back a rising tide of white supremacy and transphobia, the normalization of tyranny? I knew there was a long history of "objectivity" changing to accommodate the shifting status quo, and I wanted a journalism that rigorously pursued verifiable facts while claiming a moral stance, fighting back against racism and authoritarianism. And I thought that might be a way to rebuild trust with our audiences.

When I posted the blog, I knew it might be controversial. What I didn't know was how dramatically it would change the trajectory of my life, as my own story became part of a tense national conversation over truth and journalism. I didn't know it would lead me, eventually, to this book: a dive into the history of "objectivity" in US journalism and the stories of people who have challenged and changed how we think about truth in the news.

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At the bistro that Monday morning, Deborah Clark, the boss, seemed nervous. She had clearly prepared her speech, maybe during the flight from headquarters in L.A. She let me know that my blog post and subsequent communication had made it clear that, as she put it, I "didn't want to do the kind of journalism we do at *Marketplace*." She said she believes in a clear line between journalism and activism, and that I had crossed that line. By way of demonstration, she told a story: When she was in college studying journalism, she'd been an activist around the issue of apartheid. Clark is white and British and would have been in college at the University of California, Berkeley, sometime in the 1980s, the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. She told me she had a professor who said she'd need to make a choice: stop doing anti-apartheid activism, or abandon her desire for a career in journalism. She'd chosen journalism, she said to me with a straight face, as if leaving the anti-apartheid struggle was something a white person ought to be proud of in retrospect.

As far as I know, there hadn't been any audience complaints about the blog post or about my bias as a reporter. Still, Clark fired me on the spot, effective immediately, with an offer of two weeks' severance in exchange for agreeing not to speak publicly about what had happened. My health coverage ended two days later. I had been the first and only transgender person to work on air at the show, and one of the only trans people working at any national broadcast outlet.

I wandered off into the streets of Manhattan in shock, and the next day I put the measly severance offer in the recycling bin and went public with my story in another blog post. My goal was to expose what

I saw as a troubling double standard in which cisgender white men are treated as inherently “objective” even when they’re openly biased, while the rest of us are expected to remain “neutral” even when our lives or safety are under threat. I saw this playing out in real time: *Marketplace* had a white male host who was notorious for opinionated tweets.

For a brief and exhausting moment, I became the news. Hundreds of thousands of people read my Medium posts; I was featured in dozens of news outlets—including the *Washington Post*, *On the Media*, and *Democracy Now!*—and I was also asked to speak at conferences and universities. It was clear there was a hunger for an honest conversation about the limits of objectivity and impartiality, and whether they are the right frame for journalism today. There was also a desire to hear from a working journalist willing to criticize the status quo, as well as a lot of interest in the experience of transgender journalists, because we continue to be so rare even at a time when trans issues are in the news almost daily. I sort of hated being the “transgender journalist,” but it felt like a job that needed done.

*The View from Somewhere* is my response to the demand for a more nuanced conversation about the purpose of telling news stories in the twenty-first century, who should tell them, and how they should be told. My firing is far from the first time “objectivity” in journalism has been the subject of controversy. And many of the questions I’ve been asking about journalism and truth are hard to answer. Has objectivity in journalism ever really existed? Is detachment purely aspirational, and if so, is it the right aspiration? Is biased journalism a slippery slope into falsehood and distortion? What is the best response to “alternative facts”? How do we get people to care about stories that are true? Can truth survive the “post-fact” era? What is trust? What is truth?

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My urge to resist the status quo didn’t materialize overnight. Before I was a journalist, I was an activist, and I more or less popped out that way—I circulated my first petition when I was eight (protesting the authoritarian stance of an elementary school lunchroom supervisor)

and got suspended for insubordination multiple times during high school. I didn’t like any form of unfairness, and as I grew up, I saw unfairness everywhere: in the way queer and trans youth were kicked to the curb by parents and teachers, in the way Black and brown kids were policed in school hallways, in the war, in the next war. At fifteen, I cofounded the first youth-run LGBTQ youth organization in Michigan, out of a local teen center in Ann Arbor. At nineteen, I was in the streets of San Francisco, protesting the beginnings of the US war in Iraq, and I spent much of my twenties working on issues of police violence and providing anti-racist education for and with other white people. I was woken up many mornings by news of another police killing, another eviction, another demonstration on the curb, many of which I joined.

But I never quite became the person with the bullhorn. My mind wandered. I wanted to tell stories, to constantly learn. So I wrote articles about trans women in prison, recorded audio documentaries about youth and policing in Chicago, made zines about transformative justice. I spent time in New Orleans after Katrina and wrote about public housing, published photos of the sunflowers growing up in old house foundations in the Lower Ninth Ward. I got a degree in religious studies and learned about gender-variant medieval saints, nineteenth-century property law, William Blake and Dante and Frantz Fanon. Everything new excited me.

I always had this dream of talking on the radio. When that opportunity came my way—through a “diversity” fellowship at Chicago Public Media in 2012—I was over the moon. I remember the excitement of working the election that November, an evening I spent crunching local election numbers, printing them out, and silently running them in to the host live in the studio. The following summer, determined to get a full-time gig in radio, I applied for jobs all over the place and ended up moving from Chicago to a small town in Ohio. At WYSO, an NPR station in Yellow Springs, I moved from reporter to managing editor, filed national stories to NPR and *Marketplace*, and generally loved the fast-paced news environment. After a few years in the cornfields, I left for a job in New York City, living out a lifelong dream.

Over the years, I filed hundreds of stories heard by millions of people. I reported on the 2013 government shutdown, the disastrous rollout of the Affordable Care Act, the slow and unequal recovery from the Great Recession, John Boehner's retirement from Congress, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and, finally, the tumultuous and frenzied presidential election of 2016.

During those years, I was the only out transgender person in every newsroom, every press conference, and nearly every interview. I rarely spoke about my identity. But privately, I found the idea of a truly "objective" news media laughable, a perspective that was fairly normal in my own queer and trans community. After all, transgender people had been covered for decades with almost nothing but bias and bigotry by supposedly "objective" journalists. Constantly aware of my outsider status, I still pretended to believe that objectivity was possible in order to keep doing what I loved. My poker face sucks, but I did my best.

The traditional line in journalism is that a life on the sidelines is the price we pay for a different kind of influence, the influence of being trusted as purveyors of the facts. While I was in Ohio working for a local newsroom, my doubts about this assertion grew. I began doing research, seeking to understand where the idea of journalistic "objectivity" had come from, and how it had been challenged and changed over time. This book traces that research from before I got fired, to after my firing and the publicity surrounding it.

Much of the research is about the past, but my own reflections are very much in the present, from my limited perspective as an educated white US citizen. During this process of learning and writing, I established a freelance career, realized that the "New York media bubble" is real, and moved from Brooklyn to Durham, North Carolina. My viewpoint is strongly shaped by having lived most of my life in the Midwest and finding most of my family roots, and my current home, in the American South.

One problem that plagues this book throughout is the many uses of the word "objectivity." In general, I will use it to refer to the mod-

ern journalistic ideal as it is performed and enacted in mainstream newsrooms. In his book *Just the Facts*, media historian David Michich breaks newsroom "objectivity" down into five basic components: detachment, nonpartisanship, the use of the inverted pyramid model for news, facticity, and balance. But sometimes "objectivity" refers to the practices of journalists, and sometimes "objectivity" refers to the perceptions of audiences—in other words, journalists can attempt to be objective, while audiences can see them as unobjective and biased. And some use "objectivity" simply to mean the absence of inaccuracy and distortion, not as a synonym for impartiality. In each chapter, I attempt to pull the elements apart: Is impartiality ever possible? Is detachment the same as nonpartisanship? What is the difference between attempting "balance" and attempting to *appear* "balanced"? When "objectivity" responds to public perceptions, which public is it?

My argument against "objectivity" doesn't abandon facts, truth, or the hope that we will pursue them without undue influence from political parties or corporations. Broadly, I argue in favor of facticity and nonpartisanship, elements of "objectivity." A related idea of editorial independence also continues to resonate for me: while no one is ever entirely independent of influence, the effort for publications to remain independent from big money and political parties is important to journalistic integrity. But in public debates over news and "objectivity," this concept of institutional editorial independence is often confused with the detachment or impartiality of the individual journalist. It is this idea of a detached, impartial journalist that I take the strongest issue with, and argue vehemently against, pushing instead for transparency and self-awareness.

Lots of journalistic organizations, including the Society of Professional Journalists, have long since dropped the word "objectivity" from their ethical codes, opting instead to advocate for transparency and fairness in reporting. In the case of American Public Media's *Marketplace*, where I worked, "objectivity" wasn't actually in the ethics policy—"impartiality" was the word of choice. This makes sense, given how thoroughly "objectivity" has already been debunked. But, as I learned in my own case, the use of replacement terms such as

“impartiality” or “fairness” still allows for a great deal of interpretation, which can often result in invisible double standards: Fair to whom? Impartial in whose view? This book asks whether journalism *needs* objectivity and impartiality anymore, whether and why we need to stay out of the fray.

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One of the most helpful frames I came across in my research is the work of media scholar Daniel C. Hallin. In his 1986 book on Vietnam, *The “Uncensored War,”* he explains the limits of “objective” journalism in the US through a simple graphic of two concentric circles. The center is the sphere of consensus, the first ring is the sphere of legitimate controversy, and outside of both rings is the sphere of deviance.

As he explains it, the inner sphere of consensus is what American journalists deem to be so thoroughly agreed-upon that you can advocate for it in your work and still be seen as “objective”: ideas like *patriotism is good* or *capitalism is better than communism*. The second circle, the sphere of legitimate controversy, is where most “objective” news reporting and most attempts at balance play out: it encompasses things like Democrats versus Republicans, and debates over constitutional rights and freedoms. In mainstream journalism, the sphere of legitimate controversy is the playing field, with prevailing norms defining the boundaries.

The outer sphere of deviance is where ideas live that aren’t viewed by most journalists as legitimate and worth engaging. As Hallin writes, during wartime the idea of siding with the enemy typically lives in that sphere—the peaceniks who saw the Vietcong as revolutionaries and stood on their side weren’t usually brought onto the evening news shows. The sphere of deviance has also always contained people, ideas, and structures that are close to me. When I was born, in 1984, the idea of gay rights was mostly outside the sphere of legitimate controversy. The concepts of transgender identity and gender nonconformity were pretty much entirely in the sphere of deviance. And of course, when my mother was born, in South Carolina in 1948, racial integration was just making its way from deviance into the sphere of legitimate con-

troversy. A quarter century later, in the 1970s, she taught high school during the first year of integrated schooling in South Carolina.

The point being that the sphere of legitimate controversy changes, and it can change in any direction. In moving questions from the sphere of deviance into the sphere of legitimate controversy, journalists and other members of the public often collaborate in complex ways. And the topics and debates that fit into the spheres of consensus and controversy reflect particular ideologies and worldviews. As radio producer Ramona Martinez said to me in an interview, “Objectivity is the ideology of the status quo.”

Looking at how acceptable debate shifts over time, based on often-unspoken ideological frames, puts useful context around the idea of being impartial. Impartiality at the time of our country’s founding meant support for the institution of slavery. Impartiality today may mean a tacit agreement to watch people die of thirst and starvation at our national border to the south, or to send innocent people to a death sentence. Impartiality under apartheid meant accepting unequal racial segregation in every aspect of life. Claims of “objective” approaches to such questions can quickly devolve into a moral relativism that is dangerous and antithetical to a free society. And I am unabashed in my desire to live in a way that strives toward freedom, for myself and others.

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The stories in *The View from Somewhere* reflect my subjective search for particular kinds of people: rabble-rousers who resisted, challenged, or shook up standards for news production in the past. As a result, there’s an element of confirmation bias to this book: I sought diverse people who’d resisted “objectivity,” and I found them. Far more journalists, of many backgrounds, have either put up with or actively upheld the status quo within journalism, and that is fine with me. This book is not out to prove that their journalism was bad, but to tell stories of people who took risks to make change. I tell these stories with the shameless goal of legitimizing these debates, bringing them into focus at a time when so many of us are searching for a new way of looking at truth,

the false pretense that we are biased in favor of our own humanity, that we are too close to the story.

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As you may have gathered from my repeated use of the terms “fact” and “truth,” I don’t believe we’re in a post-fact era. We have lots of facts, lots of information—more raw data about the world is available than ever before. This abundance of facts is perhaps exactly why there is so much pressure for the role of the journalist to change, and so much insecurity about who can or should be a journalist. We are no longer professional intermediaries, controlling the access to information the way print journalists did in the 1950s—Facebook and Twitter and YouTube have taken over that role, with little regard for the standards previously held dear by journalists.

Some are horrified by the idea that people can just skip stories they don’t want to hear, go only to websites that reflect their own worldview. As a member of an outsider community too long misrepresented in mainstream news, I’m not horrified by this new paradigm of choice: I’m delighted by its potential and interested in its consequences. I think what we’re trying to figure out today is how journalists can become people who don’t just impart facts, but who interact, engage, and ultimately bring meaning and shape to information. Our stories still matter, because they tell people what world they live in, and help people imagine what other worlds might be possible. But it is more important than ever how and why these stories are produced.

*The View from Somewhere* is ultimately an argument against what I view as a damaging false dichotomy. I believe journalists can seek the truth without engaging in a battle against the subjective or the activist. And battles against subjectivity and activism have too often amounted to being battles against the marginalized and oppressed. That is because the center is ever shifting and “objectivity” is a false ideal that upholds the status quo. Once we accept that, I believe journalists can apply a new rigor and sense of mission to our work. I don’t ask that other people’s sense of mission be the same as mine. But I do hope we can take responsibility for the choices we face in shaping reality.

# 1

## HOW BLACK LIVES MATTER MADE THE NEWS

It was barely August, and I was doing early morning shifts as a radio host. That meant getting up right around sunrise and biking a few blocks through thick summer shadows to WYSO, the small radio station on the campus of Antioch College. Our newsroom was bare bones. A clunky PC glowed from one of the two desks, wire copy popping up on the screen in a steady stream. It was still called wire copy, as if it comes to us through an old telegraph wire, but it was actually the Associated Press sending dispatches over the internet. Every morning I’d sit in the dark, drink coffee, and run my eyes over tornados and fires and kidnappings and infanticides and voter turnout and political play-by-plays, the occasional “human interest” story. Once in a while there’d be some bit of humor or joy, usually on a slow news day.

On this particular morning shift, the story that jumped out at me was a police story, or rather a story about a man and the police, a quick AP dispatch about an event in Bearercreek, Ohio, a suburb ten miles from where I was sitting in the air-conditioned dark, with my face lit by the virtual wire. It opened something like this:

A man in a southwest Ohio Wal-Mart store waved a rifle at customers, including children, and was fatally shot by police when he wouldn’t drop the weapon, according to police and a recorded 911 call from a witness.

Authorities say a customer also died after suffering a medical problem during the evacuation of the store Tuesday. Police identified her as Angela Williams, 37, of Fairborn.

Police identified the man shot Tuesday night at a Wal-Mart in the Dayton suburb of Beavercreek as 22-year-old John Crawford of Cincinnati. He died at a hospital.

He waved a rifle. He wouldn't drop the weapon. Did I revise the wording, knowing even then to be skeptical of police narratives? I might have added another "police say" to qualify, aware that a man who is dead cannot tell his side of the story. I had, after all, been an activist around this stuff for years; before I was a journalist, I co-created and ran a website full of young people of color's stories about harassment and violence at the hands of police in Chicago. Growing up, my dad, an attorney, had told me, "Cops always lie." So I knew enough to know that a police statement does not a true story make. What I didn't know was that this was the beginning of the end of my faith in the whole system of news-making into which I'd been trained. That August, everything was about to change—the way the news covered policing, the way I thought about the news, and the relationship between activism and the news. It was a tipping point, but I couldn't see that yet.

Of course I couldn't. It was 5:30 a.m.; I was alone in the so-called newsroom, rushed because I was prepping for a 6 a.m. hard start, when I'd have to be ready with a four-minute newscast, the weather for today and this week, and traffic updates, saying all this into a mic while operating the soundboard and not making mistakes of any kind, or at least not making the kind of mistakes people catch: a mispronunciation, a wrong name, a verbal stumble, running over my time. With an audience of several thousand even that early, people notice when you mess up.

So that morning, in a mix of other sad stories, I read the copy about that death in Beavercreek and didn't think too much of it—another shitty news day. Beavercreek is an almost-entirely white sub-

urb of Dayton, Ohio. I didn't think much about who the man might be who'd been killed, but I pictured some wacked-out white dude, waving that gun at some kids. Incidents with white dudes and guns seemed to happen every day somewhere, so, sure as I was that journalists shouldn't trust police, I figured they'd stopped some shit from going down that could have been national news, could have dominated my day: "Shooter kills four children in Ohio Walmart," Lewis Wallace reports from Dayton. Instead it was just a "police-involved shooting," a blip. One life, which can begin to seem like nothing when you're reading out death every day. This is horrible, but I'm saying it because it's true and it can become part of how you think when you're doing daily news.

There are lots of true stories in the world. Daily news is where they are first pared down, selected out in a process called "news judgment": the split-second decisions about what is a story, and just how big and new that story is, how much airtime or word count it deserves. The decisions about which truths get told can have a ripple effect—sometimes a protest that gets news coverage becomes a larger protest; an act of violence or terrorism gains imitators and followers; a radical ideology propagates in the mainstream in part because it's been talked about on the news. I was astounded and humbled most days by the fact that I had this kind of power to choose what would become news. There I was, a weird transgender punk, alone in a dark room with my cup of coffee, making decisions that would, in small or large ways, shape what people believed their world was made up of, what was important and possible. I was also acutely aware of the stories that didn't get told, the dispatches that came through the wire and went nowhere. At the time, it was rare that a story about a police shooting got told in much depth. These deaths were covered like poverty or cancer: a thing that happens, too routine to highlight every time in a headline.

If you were one of the people reading newswires in the morning, it was obvious what stories and events were being left out. But for the people listening, it was like they never happened.

The day brightened. People came in and filled up the cheerful old

gray-carpeted science building that the radio station was now housed in, after years in a moldy basement under the student center. WYSO was the NPR station for the cities of Dayton and Springfield, but still remained in its founding spot on a college campus, and a strange college campus at that. Antioch is known for its anarchist leanings and frequent closures due to budget problems. Even with the closures, the station had been thriving there consistently since the 1950s, and it had become a mainstay. We had a membership who trusted us, a relatively diverse staff, a robust community outreach program. We were proud that we aired voices from all over the region talking about the problems that affected our listening area, like the still-lingering recession and water pollution and abandoned homes, gas prices and troubled charter schools and closed-up strip malls. We covered immigration, welfare, health care, and the sprawling US Air Force base, the jobs that came and went with each federal budget. Dayton is in many ways the epicenter of Middle America, a perfect microcosm of every Rust Belt problem and every hopeful story about overcoming it. I loved this job.

So I moved on from the miserable wire copy that morning. The on-air shift ran from 6 to 9 a.m. and then I'd prerecord and mix some stuff for the next day, stick some stories up online that I'd aired that morning, eat something real quick, drink more coffee, and start reporting, which could mean anything: working phones, running out the door to meet the latest subject for a story, who might be city official downtown, or a farmer talking about property taxes, or a group of kids hanging out in a park in a run-down part of town, sharing their dreams of getting out. That day I went to an interview in downtown Dayton and drove back home alone through the quiet suburbs, radio humming WYSO's afternoon music into my ears. Just after 1, 2, and 3 p.m., I'd listen carefully to the five-minute NPR newscast. It was a quiet summer. No big stories going on.

On Friday, August 8, there was an update to this wire story.

A man who was fatally shot by police in a Wal-Mart store in a Dayton suburb after officers say he waved a weapon at customers was carrying an air rifle, Ohio's attorney general said Thursday. Attorney General

Mike DeWine released a brief statement after the state's crime bureau said it had taken over the investigation of the shooting at the request of Beaver Creek police. Police had said John Crawford, 22, waved a rifle at customers Tuesday night and was fatally shot when he wouldn't drop the weapon. DeWine said the man had a "variable pump air rifle" made by Crosman Corp.

It had emerged that the weapon John Crawford was holding in the store was an air rifle, a BB gun—a kind that's sold at Walmart. There was more to the story, and this line further down stood out to me: "Family members and friends of Crawford had said earlier that he didn't have a real gun and suggested that the purported rifle was a toy."

We read this new copy on air, kept going with our busy day. In the days that followed, the headlines began to morph. It became clear that Crawford had picked up an unloaded BB gun/air rifle that was on display in the Walmart, and he was still on the phone with his children's mother when he was shot; the officer who had shot Crawford had been involved in the only other fatal police shooting in the department's history, five years before. An open box was found on a Walmart display. The Beaver Creek Police Department declined comment, and the case was passed on to the state's attorney general.

On Saturday, August 9, a local lawyer, Michael Wright, announced he would be holding a press conference with John Crawford III's parents, saying they were skeptical of police accounts of his death. "The family wants answers," Wright said to the local TV station. "We just want to get answers. We are seeking video, witness statements and investigatory items." The radio station was quiet that day, volunteer DJs going in and out the glass doors. I was at home, cooking and gardening, glancing at my phone. No one from the station attended Monday's press conference: not enough staff to cover it.

Saturday, August 9, 2014. It flicked across my phone sometime that night, maybe the next morning. Something had happened in a place called Ferguson. That day, a baby-faced eighteen-year-old named Michael Brown had been shot and killed by police outside St. Louis, Missouri, and his neighbors and family members had watched and



tweeted as his body lay crumpled and bloodied on the sidewalk for hours. That night, the police in Ferguson held a press conference, but by then, the protests had already started. Ferguson, Missouri, was opening up to the rage and sadness of Michael Brown's death, and it was happening quickly; there were rumors of rioting, property destruction. The sense that something larger was about to jump off had spread across social media. This day, this moment, would begin weeks of daily national coverage that came to be referred to just as "Ferguson" ("Did you cover Ferguson?"; "I went to Ferguson"), but Ferguson was shorthand for "Black people are dying at the hands of police, and there is now a giant and growing protest movement to stop it."

As I took it all in on Monday morning, I felt a flush of shame. Just days before Brown's death became the biggest story in the country, I had overlooked our own local version of that story. I had seen it flash by on the screen, read some lines about it on air, and assumed it was a blip. I had gone along with it as John Crawford, unarmed and now dead, was first defined in the public eye as a "suspect." I'd done something I knew better than to do: repeated an official narrative without looking any further. Suddenly the whole country was watching this same dynamic play out in another midwestern city. Activists in the street were asking: Why do the police keep killing young Black people, particularly those who are unarmed? How many, how often, how disproportionately? They were demanding that the news media cover these deaths. Twitter was on fire; Facebook was on fire; Ferguson was on fire.

What would happen in the weeks and months to follow would change not only my own approach to reporting, but the way my entire industry approached stories about police violence and race. Black Lives Matter, the movement and the organizations and people involved in it, would do what their predecessors in the civil rights movement had done decades before: pose a protracted challenge to news judgment, to which stories get told and why. This change didn't happen because white reporters like me sat in newsrooms somewhere and realized what we'd done wrong, that we'd criminalized the victims or idealized the perpetrators, and it didn't happen because there was a white awak-

ening in the United States about what Black Americans were living through, or because there were more Black reporters in newsrooms than ever before (unfortunately, there weren't). It happened because a hashtag and a movement took hold, and part of that movement's strategy was to shift the frame, to put all Black people's deaths at the hands of the police into the sphere of legitimate controversy. Journalistic ideas about news judgment and balance would be pushed to a breaking point. "Police-involved shooting," the terminology preferred by law enforcement, would become a pointedly non-neutral phrase. Black Lives Matter functioned, in a way, as a news organization, shifting the frame by using Twitter and Facebook and Instagram and Snapchat to tell the stories being left out of the news.

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Suddenly everyone was talking about Ferguson. The national media focused on property destruction and conflicts between police and protesters; local media looked for "local angles" like protesters traveling to Missouri or holding similar protests in their own towns. And my busy, harried self knew that we had just had a police shooting in our coverage area, that the man had died, that he'd been holding an air rifle that police initially said was a firearm. But what I didn't realize until August 9, 2014, the day of Michael Brown's death, was that John Crawford III was Black and his shooter was white. The man who'd called the police on Crawford, Ronald Ritchie, was also white.

About two weeks after Brown's death, a group of Antioch students called a protest as part of the national #HandsUpWalkOut event. The students and a handful of community members were going to speak the names of Black people killed by police and hold blown-up printouts of their portraits: Michael Brown. Oscar Grant. Eric Garner. John Crawford III. These students, along with a group called the Ohio Student Association, were determined to get Crawford's name and face into the news. Another local group organized a protest for Crawford at the federal courthouse, responding in part to requests by his parents in Cincinnati—they were crushed, and convinced that racism had killed their son. They were also determined to find out

what had happened: Why had a man holding a product sold in the Walmart been shot and killed? Who were the officers involved, and were they facing any consequences? Was there surveillance video showing these events? Why couldn't the public see those tapes? In that terrible moment, another person had also died—a woman who was inside the Walmart had a heart attack on her way to the door after hearing the police gunshots.

Pretty soon, the Ohio Student Association was demanding that Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine release the surveillance video from Walmart. And suddenly John Crawford went from a few lines off the wire to the most important story we were covering: activists had come from other states to demonstrate in front of the Greene County Courthouse. Crawford's aggrieved parents were in BuzzFeed. DeWine held a press conference to announce a grand jury investigation into the case. While no new details about the shooting itself were coming out, our station covered its ripple effects: the voices of the young activists, the attorney general's restrained attempts to project empathy for the family, the occasional blustering white person dismissing the protesters as angry about nothing. At the end of September, the attorney general's office released a limited section of surveillance video from that evening. Because activists had been demanding its release, the video itself was news. The footage was immediately plastered across the internet: Black man shot by police in cold blood in a Walmart, and so on. During this time period, I had become the managing editor at WYSSO, and I was tasked with sitting down with our web editor and afternoon host to decide both how to report this development and whether to post the video to our site.

That meant watching the video, multiple times, hunched over someone's laptop in the common space outside our broadcast studio. There was no sound, and our station kept blaring music through the speakers while we watched the grainy video of Crawford, with tiny twists in his hair, baggy jeans, and a T-shirt, walking distractedly through the aisle, talking on his phone. You don't see the moment when he scoops up the unloaded BB gun, but suddenly he has it. He's not apparently pointing it at anyone; he's on the phone, talking in an animated way,

the BB gun hanging at his side. He's visibly distracted and does not, to me, look threatening. The moment when he gets shot is surprising even when you know it's coming: his body suddenly goes stiff with fear, he looks down the aisle toward someone, and, seemingly immediately, he drops to the floor and dips out of sight of the camera, crawling as if in the trenches of a war zone. He stands briefly and reappears, then collapses again as two police officers rush toward him, guns drawn.

That's the end of the video, which would later be coupled with audio from the phone call he was on. One of the officers handcuffed Crawford as he bled to death. His ex, still on the phone with him, was hanging out at his mom's house with the kids, and she handed the phone to his mom after she heard the shots. His mother, Tressa Sherrod, stayed on the line listening as her twenty-two-year-old son bled out in the pet food aisle.

By the next morning, there was a police statement claiming he had waved a gun and ignored orders to drop it. It is still unknown whether police were lying when they said he had a real gun, or truly didn't know at the time of their press release that it was an unloaded BB gun. It is also still unknown whether Ronald Ritchie, the 911 caller, consciously lied or exaggerated about Crawford waving it at people; we did learn later that Ritchie had lied about his former military status when the story first became public. In any case, an "active shooter" was nowhere in this video. It was blurry, yes, and the timing was hard to make out. But Ohio is an open-carry state, and what I saw was a picture of a tragedy—a murder. I was increasingly horrified that I had ever been part of telling the police version of the story: the shock and fear and vulnerability I'd seen in Crawford's young body kept me up at night. We decided not to post it but put a link to the video in our story about the news of its release.

The video brought still more attention to the case. Because of the activists who had stirred the pot, John Crawford's death had become a story, a story with obvious parallels to Michael Brown's death and the deaths of many other Black people at the hands of police, and with obvious connections to institutionalized police practices, to rules and policies or the lack thereof. My colleague Jerry Kenney did a na-

tional story for NPR about the case. We did local stories about police body cameras, about efforts to better track police violence in the state, about religious responses to Crawford's death. For one piece, I talked to a Black preacher in Dayton who was also the only Black father on his block. He lived in Beavercreek, the suburb where Crawford had been killed, and he said he was afraid for his sons, told them not to play in the yard. The killing of a twelve-year-old holding a toy gun was not unprecedented in our state: by the time I interviewed him, it had just happened to Tamir Rice in Cleveland. In December 2014, I did a piece for NPR about several multiracial families in Dayton who were heading to DC for a march on Washington about police violence. A photograph of John Crawford III holding his newborn son circulated around the internet and was turned into paintings and posters.

...

This shift, from John Crawford as a blip to John Crawford as a story, was part of a national strategy advanced by activists associated with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to make every police-involved death into a news story. Mervyn Marcano was one of the people who'd been plotting the movement's media strategy nearly from the beginning, as a communications director with several nonprofits including Color of Change, and later with his own communications firm, Blackbird, which worked largely behind the scenes through many of these key developments.

Marcano, who, like me, was in his early thirties when Michael Brown died, is clever and cynical beyond his years, with a wide smile and a soft mustache. He's also an old friend of mine, from when we were both underage queer youth who had more or less run away from home to a collective house in Detroit (but that's definitely another story). While I was managing the chaos of covering a national story from a tiny local newsroom in Ohio, he was living in Oakland and watching the developments in Ferguson on Twitter and on TV. The first two weeks, he said, it was all about the "breaking news disaster press corps." On TV and in most newspapers, the images were of a chaotic scene: trash cans burning, protesters facing off with riot cops

after dark, police press conferences calling for calm. But he saw a completely different narrative on social media. There, the Ferguson story was about grief, Black death, a wounded community that had finally boiled over. Black Twitter was at a fever pitch, #BlackLivesMatter was trending, and #HandsUpDontShoot had become a refrain. On TV, it was about "violent protests" and unruly streets: a "too bad, so sad" event prompting an overreaction. Even the NPR coverage, which I followed carefully, frequently focused on the property destruction and referred to protests as "riots."

"The less violence there was, the less interesting this story was to them," Marcano said of the national media. In the first two weeks of coverage, "people were being talked about as criminals, going to war with the police. There wasn't real storytelling about Ferguson." In a moment that became notorious among journalists and activists, the *New York Times* referred to Michael Brown as "no angel" in a story discussing his upcoming memorial.

About two weeks after Brown's death, Marcano flew from Oakland to Ferguson at the request of local organizers in Missouri and stayed for six months. By that time, he said, most of the major media had left—and that was when his work with Blackbird became really important.

...

After the fact, we know a lot about Ferguson. We know that in a majority-Black town with a police force of fifty-three, fifty of the cops were white. We know that Black residents there had long endured a toxic mix of racialized targeting and a municipal court system that funded itself through tickets for traffic stops and minor violations that amount to a police tax on Ferguson's poorest residents. Thanks to a federal investigation spurred by the protests, we know that police had routinely covered up abuses, particularly of Black people. And we know that the community there had reached a boiling point for a set of reasons that went way beyond the details of what happened to Michael Brown. Images of his death, the brazenness of the police who left his body laying out for hours, were a last straw. But in August

2014, virtually none of that had yet been reported in national or local media.

And so Ferguson appeared in the news as a sudden explosion, not as a pot boiling over. Before then, the St. Louis area's Black neighborhoods were largely reported on TV news as sites of crime and violence; in more liberal outlets, they were "tough" places full of poverty and disinvestment. That a lot of Black people in Missouri went to jail and prison was reported; why this was the case was largely unexplored. That "police-community relations" were bad was certainly known; again, the reasons why were rarely illuminated in a news story.

Ferguson and St. Louis were no different than most other parts of the country, where strong police unions and police organizations such as the Fraternal Order of Police had long pursued a strategy of fighting every accusation of police abuse, tooth and nail, protecting both their individual members and their profession writ large. Police organizations participated assertively in shaping narratives about "police-involved shootings," while fragmented and impoverished communities like Ferguson had fewer structures in place to counter the official narrative. What this meant for decades was that when a Black person got killed by police, the police had extensive media organization behind them, and the Black person did not. A few cases got national coverage anyway, like Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, and Oscar Grant, who was one of the first examples of police killing a Black man while cell phones recorded from all sides.

News reporting often reflected this disparity in resources, and, as such, it wasn't so much false reporting as lazy or even just under-resourced reporting. Reporters were doing what I had done when I read that wire copy about John Crawford: reflecting the information available without any attempt to overcome preexisting power dynamics. What to report and focus on was decided by default, and getting the police version was easy, while getting the rest was hard.

Mervyn Marcano and his team were PR people, in the business of communications and spin. Still, they aimed not to propagate tall tales about cops or depict them as individually bad people, but to expose institutional power structures. They wanted to right historical wrongs

by filling in the gaping holes in the picture, by helping to answer the burning questions: Why had these tragedies happened? Why did they keep happening? Why were police so often protected when they killed innocent or unarmed people, especially Black people? Marcano and his team started with shifting the narrative around protest. Local police at the time would hold a nightly press conference, feeding the major outlets their version of what had happened in the last twenty-four hours. As Marcano describes it, these conferences followed a familiar formula: They'd pull out a brick that was thrown, or some other evidence of a property damage, and point to the protesters en masse as the cause. They'd list off arrests and get asked few questions by reporters filling in details for their nightly filing.

Reporters, meanwhile, weren't necessarily doing the lofty and idealistic job they'd learned about in journalism school. They were scrambling under the daily pressures of the job, getting to "the story" in the fastest and easiest way they could, under pressure from bosses and a twenty-four-hour news cycle. As a result, these stories followed a formula, too: the official facts, a comment from police, maybe an attempt to speak to a random "eyewitness" or "man on the street" to give the story authenticity and color. In this fast-moving environment, packed with national and international media, there was pressure to scoop the next development, with little incentive to slow down and investigate the context more deeply. Local news was already defunded to a devastating extent; police beat reporters were rare, and where they did exist, it took a strong mind to do anything more than keep up with the newstree put out by police themselves. National outlets with more resources came and went based on how sensational the story was.

Marcano was sympathetic to the situation of journalists and saw his role as helping them.

"We had to educate journalists in terms of using police press releases and why that's not a good idea. This moment requires more than blotter reporting," he said. He worked the crowd at those press events, connecting the more interested journalists with local residents, individual protesters, people whose lives had been affected directly by the ongoing police abuses. He took them to people's houses, so journal-

ists could meet with community members and get another side of the story, instead of sitting in their hotels waiting for the next police press conference. And he and Blackbird began to help journalists frame the problem differently, to connect them with sources who would explain why Michael Brown's death wasn't viewed as an isolated incident by people in Ferguson.

"That's the kind of stuff you had to train journalists to tease out," he said. These journalists weren't substandard, but they also weren't superhuman—not knowing what questions to ask, particularly when you are covering an unfamiliar situation or community, is normal. What Blackbird was trying to do was make it unacceptable not to look beneath the surface of the story. Blackbird worked closely with activists to put out daily notices with their own official version of what had happened and developed source lists and training documents for journalists. They did one-on-one meetings, helped with outreach around an upcoming action that October, and connected with activists across the country working under the #BlackLivesMatter banner.

Eventually, Marciano says, the coverage did change. Over time, the story became about the structures that led to the protests: the racism, the institutional abuse, the forced segregation and disinvestment that had built the St. Louis area into a world of extreme and visible inequality. Surrounding Brown's death were decades of torn-down housing projects, neighborhoods split by highways, white flight and the collapse of industry, a massive loss of Black wealth in the housing crash, and endemic police violence against Black communities dating back to the earliest days of the city's existence. There was a legacy of white supremacy and anti-Blackness in the county and the state, sometimes blatant, sometimes embedded in policy. Bit by bit, that larger story began to be told out of Missouri.

I wish it were true that journalists were already doing all this—the sourcing, the teasing out, the analysis, the history. I wish our assumption was that no police story can be told with just a statement from the police. I wish we had an analysis of the ways in which historical white supremacy undergirds even the simplest little news story. And yet I, too, had been guilty of blotter reporting, just weeks before all

this, as I read wire copy about John Crawford in the predawn light. It's not incidental that I am white: mostly white newsrooms typically weren't sufficiently attentive to police killings, or to any racial justice issue, and they had often waited for outside pressure to cover communities of color in any thorough and deep way. The presence of Black reporters had certainly helped, but for decades now, there's been a dearth of Black journalists in both broadcast and print newsrooms, and in recent years that problem has gotten worse, not better, in many newsrooms.

Marciano says that oftentimes Blackbird was teaching journalists "how to cover Black people," how to clue into conversations already well underway in many Black communities. Wesley Lowery of the *Washington Post*, one of the journalists who did the earliest in-depth coverage of Ferguson and one of the few Black journalists covering police for a national outlet, arrived on the scene just after Brown died and was arrested two days later by Ferguson police inside a McDonald's. Marciano said he worked closely with Lowery, and the *Post* became the outlet, along with the *Guardian*, that did the most thorough and sustained coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement and its causes and goals. But these two outlets' coverage happened against the odds, and their decision to dedicate so many resources to it came in part because of ongoing mass protests in the city. Lowery's editors rarely sent him to the places where protests fizzled.

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The fallout in Ferguson stretched across the country. Suddenly #BlackLivesMatter was in the news almost daily. But in Chicago, where I'd spent seven years before I went to Ohio for the WYSO job, police killings were and remain so routine, it took a whole team of people from multiple organizations to begin to shift how media covered these events.

Aislinn Pulley, a lifelong Chicagoan whose parents were socialist activists, was one of the people at the forefront of those changes. Before Ferguson, she'd been taking a break from in-the-streets activism after getting burned out. But when the events in Ferguson came

to Chicago via Twitter and Instagram, a group of Chicago organizers called We Charge Genocide had already been trying to draw attention to the death of one of their friends, Dominique “Damo” Franklin, who’d been killed by a police Taser at age twenty-three earlier that year. I knew of Damo from my work with an organization called Project NIA that aimed to end youth incarceration, and I had worked with many young people who knew him. Damo had been painted as a bad victim, because he had a weapon on him at the time of his death. But we all knew the back story—his hard life, his fear of police, and the simple fact that police should not be able to execute someone, accident or not. But they can, and they did. His death had traumatized this community, and it hadn’t made national news.

Pulley had shown up for a community meeting about Damo, and as August 2014 unfolded, she found herself suddenly in the role of organizing a busload of activists from Chicago to go join the protests in Ferguson. After that first protest, the group coalesced into Black Lives Matter Chicago—part of a network of Black Lives Matter groups around the country.

They faced many of the same media hurdles as Ferguson organizers. Each time police shot and killed someone, Pulley said, “the news would just report what the police union press release would say, and that would be it, there would be no counter.” Black Lives Matter made it their goal, alongside allied groups like the People’s Response Team and We Charge Genocide, to present a counter-narrative in as many cases as possible.

Pulley says it took a while to get organized, but by early 2017, the group had its drill down. A young man named Chad Robertson was shot by Amtrak police near downtown on February 8 of that year. Police had said that he had drugs on him, a technique often used to indict a person after the fact. But another story quickly emerged: Robertson was from Minneapolis and was on a layover in Chicago, traveling home from a funeral in Memphis. He’d taken Megabus, a cheap Greyhound alternative that doesn’t have its own stations or shelters, and he and other passengers had been waiting out the freezing cold inside an Amtrak station. After a tense interaction where Amtrak police asked

the passengers to go back outside, officers had shot Robertson in the back as he ran away. Robertson was taken to Cook County Hospital, and Pulley and her friends’ phones started blowing up as his family learned he’d been hospitalized.

Black Lives Matter put up money for an Airbnb for what turned out to be over a dozen members of Robertson’s family from Minnesota and worked closely with them to set up a press conference while he sat in the hospital in critical condition. While police advanced a story that Robertson was a criminal, killed for threatening behavior, Black Lives Matter and his family told a different story: that he was a young traveler on a layover, shot in the back. “We told the truth,” said Pulley, “and the media picked up on that, and that became the narrative that was published.”

Five days after their first press conference, which was packed with reporters from every major outlet, Chad Robertson died in Cook County Hospital, with his mother at his side. Two days later, Pulley says, the state’s attorney pressed murder charges against the officer, a very unusual move in Chicago at the time.

Because of the organizing work Black Lives Matter was doing, alternative narratives about victims of police violence had become impossible to ignore, Pulley said. But she also warned that this shifting of the frame in Chicago took sustained work; without an organized effort to get this kind of coverage, “it could very well revert back, and it more than likely will.”

Which raises the question of the responsibility of journalists themselves, ourselves. If Chad Robertson’s family’s story was true, why wasn’t the local press doing the work of telling that truth, or at least of trying?

...

Steven Thrasher was one of few national journalists who’d already been questioning Black criminalization and pushing for different kinds of coverage; before Ferguson, in 2014 he’d spent months in the St. Louis area working on a story about a Black man incarcerated for purportedly spreading HIV, another type of criminalization story. After Fer-

guson, he also rushed to the scene, to do on-the-ground coverage for the *Guardian*, where he was on contract as a columnist.

But unlike news reporters who claimed “objectivity,” Thrasher approached Ferguson with a sense of mission. He’s Black and queer, and he said his goal as a writer was to write stories that are relatable for people like him. “I wanted to make people of color, especially black men, feel seen, feel that their experiences were validated. I wanted people to know that this is not aberrational. . . . [T]he thing that happened to Mike Brown is terrible, but it’s completely common in our communities.”

Thrasher was in Ferguson on and off for many weeks, and he noticed a profound shift during this time period, one that Mervyn Marcano also made note of: prior to Brown’s death, Thrasher said, “when these shootings would happen, there was this presumption of guilt . . . that the person who was shot by police must have deserved it.” And in fact, the narrative of police innocence had been so overwhelming that most police killings did not become major news stories, even in cases with victims who were young, psychologically disabled, or unarmed. These stories were not within the sphere of legitimate controversy, and they were rarely judged newsworthy beyond a few lines of copy, as illustrated by my own behavior just after John Crawford’s death.

After Ferguson, at least for a period of time before the 2016 election, that news judgment changed. Almost any police killing could become fodder for a major local story, and big protests would often go national. Both Marcano and Thrasher say this was thanks to an intentional reframing of the question of innocence—Marcano says activists in his camp decided not to feed into narratives of good protesters or bad protesters, good victims or bad victims. When the *New York Times* published that article describing Brown as “no angel,” the movement rejected that frame—focusing not on the message that Brown *had* been an angel, but on the idea that no kid’s guilt or innocence should be tried in the court of public opinion after the police have been allowed to execute him.

“In order for us to get coverage about deaths of folks at the hands of the state, whether that’s on the street or in jails or in prisons, we no

longer have to go through the rigamarole of ‘they were a good family man, they got straight A’s.’ They didn’t have to have any of that,” Marcano said. “These stories are more real and more in line with how we live our lives than these fantasy narratives of respectability that didn’t do anything to disrupt the structural problems.”

Activists had successfully shifted the frame: suddenly John Crawford was a story; Rekia Boyd was a story; Sandra Bland was a story. Black death at the hands of police was being revealed as an epidemic; the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post* both began to count and track these deaths, allowing reporters to measure the racial disparities as well as increases or changes in deaths at the hands of police. It was revealed that in 2015, one in thirteen gun deaths in the US was a police shooting (not including suicides and accidents). It was revealed that Black people were killed by police at 2.5 times the rate of white people.

“You would not have seen these kinds of pieces being written ten or even five years ago,” Thrasher said. All police killings of Black people, even ones where the investigation was closed, had entered the sphere of legitimate controversy.

. . . .

How does something *become a story*? In other words, how does an issue move from the sphere of deviance, the unspeakable, or the unimportant, into the zone of controversy and legitimate debate? News judgment is one of the most unquestioned, charged, and non-neutral aspects of the daily decisions that go into creating purportedly “objective” news. News judgment is supposed to be based on a mix of factors that are usually presented to journalists and students of journalism as factual but are actually somewhat mystical. News judgment asks: What does our audience deem important? Which stories matter and are worth being told? And news judgment answers those questions quickly, decisively, sometimes in the act of a single host or journalist alone in front of the AP wire putting together a newscast, or a single editor turning down a story pitch, sometimes in the act of an editorial board or set of newsroom leaders in a morning meeting, drinking coffee and talking about what is newsworthy, which more often than not

means what they think is interesting or what they think their bosses or audiences will believe that they should cover.

When I was first taught news judgment, in the newsroom at WBEZ in Chicago, where I was trained in radio, I was taught to look for a few things: novelty, surprise, relevance, and impact, and each of these elements was presented as something one could fairly discern. And yet I saw again and again how that process of discernment is overshadowed by so much that goes unsaid. An editor who lives in a floodplain, for example, may be more likely than another editor to assign a story about rising river waters during a rainy season. An editor who's never heard about transgender children facing discrimination may find the topic newsworthy and fascinating in a way that someone familiar with the problem might have trouble seeing. (These examples are real.) And an editor who is white may not see a Black man's death at the hands of police as anything more than a one-off, a story that might be interesting if it happened near your house but isn't newsworthy until its impact is proven. White editors have made that last call over and over again. Black Lives Matter stopped them, stopped us, in our tracks.

News judgment is the first filter all news passes through, and it usually isn't based on anything measurable: we don't look to statistics on our current or desired audience or even our most popular stories of the past to decide what to cover. Some of this is good, protecting journalists against the influence of a purely commercial way of thinking about news. But news judgment is still always about power—who controls the narrative, whose narratives matter, and how the appearance of “mattering” is created in a society rife with entrenched inequality. Black Lives Matter, in that sense, was and is a news organization that tells stories to a mass audience, striving for a more factual, thorough representation of Black life and death. And it's a movement that has changed how these stories themselves come to matter and come to be seen as true or important. It has posed a protracted challenge to the purportedly objective framework of news judgment in journalism institutions across the country. And it has changed the lives of journalists like me, who struggled to articulate and put into practice the idea

that all Black lives mattered until this group called for every story about state violence against Black people to be told in context.

Still, these stories are told unevenly. In Ferguson, Justice Department investigators showed up and put out a report about how police in the St. Louis suburb use minor traffic violations and misdemeanor charges to line the city's coffers. But that reality, or a reality a lot like it, had already been playing out in cities around the country, and in some cases had already been uncovered by lawsuits and reports. Ferguson's report was national news because Ferguson was already national news; the assumption then was that “people,” whoever they are, would want to know about it.

On the other hand, in Beavercreek and Dayton, protests around the death of John Crawford continued steadily through 2014 and 2015. WYSO covered many of them. We covered the release of the video of Crawford's last moments, the grainy image of him collapsing in pain. We covered the grand jury's decision not to indict the officers involved in the shooting. I remember hearing that news from my coworker Jerry's mouth through my car radio, crying bitter tears, and rushing back to the station to figure out who would go to the evening press conference. After the case was passed to the federal Department of Justice, we called the DOJ over and over for an update, hearing nothing for years, until July 2017, when the Feds quietly dropped the investigation.

In 2015 we made an hour-long documentary to release on the anniversary of John Crawford's death, August 5. And we covered the death of Crawford's girlfriend, Tasha Thomas, who was killed in a car crash on New Year's Day of 2015. Her friend who was driving had apparently been going ninety on a local street in Dayton, in a forty-mile-per-hour zone. They both died on impact, tragedy compounding tragedy. Because it was New Year's Day, we didn't have the story until the next morning, and we didn't have anyone to send out to her memorial or track down her grieving family. Sometimes news judgment is also just about limited capacity.

And sometimes it's about unspoken assumptions about what is interesting. I pitched stories about Beavercreek and John Crawford to



NPR for national airing more than once. Isn't it interesting, I posited, that in Beavercreek, Ohio, there have been no homicides in the last five years, but there have been two fatal shootings at the hands of the same police officer? Isn't it fascinating that this mostly white suburb has proven a difficult place to launch and sustain a protest movement against police violence? Shouldn't we talk about how long-term policies and practices of racial segregation in the Dayton area are connected with Crawford's death, in that he was a Black man killed for nothing but stopping off to shop in an all-white suburb? I pitched all that as a feature story to NPR, a portrait of how white segregation can lead to Black death, how protest can be silenced by segregation, and that pitch was turned down.

In April 2015, I followed the local Black Lives Matter group into a Beavercreek City Council meeting. After a brief protest surrounded by police cruisers in the parking lot, the multiracial group filled the tiny council chambers, taking nearly all the seats and sitting quietly under the fluorescent lights holding yellow "Black Lives Matter" signs. The meeting took place without a peep about John Crawford III, although outside, seemingly the entire Beavercreek police force had gathered. The items on the agenda had nothing to do with police, and all of the recognized speakers were white. Before the end of the council meeting, though, one of the protesters stood up with a bullhorn and began to speak, demanding that the city council address police misconduct and apologize to John Crawford's family. Within moments, everyone was kicked out, escorted single file by pushy cops. I recorded all the action and called up NPR's newscast desk when I got back to the office; did they want a colorful forty-five seconds about protesters getting kicked out of a city council meeting in suburban Ohio, trying to draw attention to this one young man's death? *The trouble is*, the person at the newscast desk told me, *there are riots still going on in Baltimore. That's the lead story tonight. We'll have to pass on this one.*

News judgment matters. It affects what kind of world we think we live in, and who we think populates that world. I think of all the ways

NPR's newscast would be different if a small moment of defiance like that one in the Beavercreek City Council chambers sometimes led at the top of the hour. What if the 11 p.m. newscast that day, rolling out softly into people's cars on darkened highways across the country, had told a story about twenty people in Ohio pushed to the sidelines again and again, and then gone from there to the angry streets of Baltimore? What if listeners had heard a white Beavercreek resident asking why "they can't just move on" (a quote I had recorded that night at the city council meeting), and then after that heard the police batons cracking down on people heartbroken about Freddie Gray? What if, in the years before John Crawford III and Michael Brown died, stories of people like them had been told over and over, so relentlessly that it felt like the epidemic that it was, covered so relentlessly that it mattered beyond the devastated families, the witnesses burdened forever with images of blood and flashing lights?

We can change what news judgment means, I thought. The process of how something becomes a story, depicted to the public as a product of some kind of mystically fair and yet tragically limited weighing of the scales, is one of the most subjective and unexamined collective processes I have ever observed in action. It is about power, and in my case, as the managing editor in a newsroom, I had acquired some of the exact kind of power it requires. So I tried to make change in my own small ways, pushing for us to cover almost any protest, large or small, and making sure that when someone was killed by police, we asked questions and followed up in every case. Never again, I thought, will my eyes breeze over some wire copy about this and not pause and wonder.

Black Lives Matter shifted the frame, but as Aislinn Pulley pointed out, the frame can always shift back again. Journalists, it occurred to me, need to know what we stand for; we need to search beyond our assumptions about newsworthiness to look at why a story matters, why one life matters more than another, why twenty people protesting with their voices is less newsworthy than twenty people breaking windows or lighting trash cans on fire. We need a moral compass to make these decisions with integrity. This need to define our values felt urgent to

me, especially as I became someone who had a say over news assignments. Why, I wondered, was the utter subjectivity of news judgment so obscured in our professional training? I needed to go back and learn where this whole idea of objectivity in journalism had come from in the first place.

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Lewis Raven Wallace is an independent journalist; a cofounder of *Press On*, a southern movement journalism collective; and the host of *The View from Somewhere* podcast. He previously worked in public radio and is a longtime activist engaged in prison abolition, racial justice, and queer and trans liberation. He is a white transgender person from the Midwest and is now based in North Carolina.

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