

Scene on the Radio: Season 4 - Episode 11 - “A lot of violence has been done to the truth in the name of objectivity”

Audio: Required listening minutes 8:45 - 28:43 (20 minutes)

[00:08:45] Here's Lewis Raven Wallace.

[00:08:47] I started with so many questions. I wanted to know where this ideal of objectivity even came from in the first place. And I wanted to know about other journalists who had gone against the grain, queer and trans folks and people of color who had said no to this same framework and stood up for their communities as journalists. One of the first big figures I came across, who is key to my understanding of all this now, was Ida B. Wells.

[00:09:17] So picture this, a 21 year old black woman riding in a train car, 1883, the white conductor comes by taking tickets and tells her she has to move to the black car up front.

[00:09:31] This is the lady's car, he says, which means white ladies. When she refuses, the conductor grabs her.

[00:09:38] He tried to drag me out of the seat, but the moment he caught hold of my arm, I fastened my teeth to the back of his hand. I had braced my feet against the seat in front. And as he had already been badly beaten, he didn't try it again by himself. He went forward and got the baggage man and another man to help him. And of course, they succeeded in dragging me out.

[00:10:03] Wells describes all this in her autobiography. As she was dragged out of the train car. The white lady watched and applauded. She got off the train, found a lawyer, sued and won.

[00:10:14] I can see to this day the headlines in the Memphis appeal announcing Darkie Damsel gets damages, though the railroad appealed and she had to give those damages back. Anyhow, point being, Ida B. Wells was amazing.

[00:10:30] She was a tremendously energetic, strong minded young woman.

[00:10:37] This is Professor Mia Bay, author of "To Tell the Truth Freeley The Life of Ida Be Wells."

[00:10:46] Wells was born into slavery in 1862 and spent her teens taking care of her five younger siblings in her 20s she moved to Memphis and became part owner and editor of a black newspaper, The Memphis Free Speech. Then in 1892, something happened.

[00:11:02] She had been traveling to promote her newspaper, but when she came back, she found Memphis, Black Memphis, completely terrorized.

[00:11:10] A conflict between a white man and a black man had escalated for a few days and ended in a gnarly street fight. After that, a white mob lynched three black men. The three men, Will Stewart, Calvin McDowell and Thomas Moss were co-owners of the People's Grocery, and Moss was one of Wells close friends. Something stood out to her about why her friends had been lynched. See, at the time there was a standard story told in the white run media about lynching.

[00:11:40] That lynchings were necessary to keep black men in line, that they were often about disappointing men who had been criminals or men who had raped women.

[00:11:49] There was this idea that black men were succumbing to their supposedly primitive nature with white women. They were criminals. And so lynching might have been uncouth and technically illegal. But it was painted as a form of justice, says Bay.

[00:12:04] The local white newspapers wrote in support of lynchings and kind of talk the sort of standard line about hell. Black people had to be disciplined and black men, you know, were rapists.

[00:12:17] Even Wells had assumed that people who were lynched elsewhere had generally done something illegal first.

[00:12:23] But it was super clear that all this didn't apply to what had happened to her friends. As co-owners of a grocery store, they were successfully competing with local white grocers, and it was the white grocer who led the charge against them.

[00:12:39] So she began to research why lynchings actually took place.

[00:12:43] She went to places where lynchings happened and talk to people. Wells compiled data from newspapers. Not only did she count lynchings, but she counted how many had happened in response to an accusation. How many of those accusations may have been fabricated? How many were in response to no crime at all? She even hired white private investigators in some cases. In her autobiography "Crusade for Justice," Wells wrote about her findings.

[00:13:09] They had committed no crime against white women. This is what opened my eyes to what lynching really was. It was economic terrorism, she said. A way to keep black people down.

[00:13:21] As she was learning all this in 1892, Wells wrote an editorial that said in part, Nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and the conclusion will be reached, which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.

[00:13:44] She was traveling when this particular editorial came out, but she got word that her implication that white women might be seducing black men had gotten white people in Memphis so mad. If she went back, she would be lynched. After a mob in Memphis trashed her newspaper office, friends in New York implored her not to go back there.

[00:14:04] Because I saw the chance to be more of service to the cause by staying in New York than by returning to Memphis, I accepted their advice, took a position on the New York Age and continued my fight against lynching in lynchers. They had destroyed my paper in which every dollar I had in the world was invested. They had made me an exile and threatened my life for hinting at the truth. I felt that I owed it to myself and my race to tell the whole truth.

[00:14:33] Wells took huge risks by telling the whole truth as a young black woman, while the white press didn't even bother to ask those same questions.

[00:14:43] And this is where the problem of objectivity comes in. Already in the 1890s, there was this idea that newspapers, if they are going to be authoritative, should be, quote, neutral and impartial on questions of race. But what that actually meant was that they were racist. For example, The New York Times had an apologetic take on lynching. It was bad, yes, but so was rape.

[00:15:08] What we saw in the 1880s and 1890s was that the white mainstream newspapers were using all the trappings of objectivity. All the elements of objectivity to paint a picture of lynching.

[00:15:27] This is David Mindich, a journalism professor at Temple University. Mindich says this chasm between the white story about lynching and the real story about lynching gets shielded by the notion of objectivity. People weren't actually using that word yet, but starting in the mid eighteen hundreds. Lots of white papers were trying to be nonpartisan and balanced.

[00:15:49] However, they were also using their racist baggage, right? There were also bringing their racist lens, their racist goggles to the to the question of lynching. And there was no accuracy about the story in the 1980s and 90s.

[00:16:11] He says white writers at the time just couldn't imagine black men as innocent or imagine that white women might have consensual relationships with them.

[00:16:19] So there are a whole bunch of racist elements that were getting in the way of telling a truthful story.

[00:16:27] Racist elements getting in the way of telling the truth. That felt so familiar to me from watching everything unfold with Donald Trump, obviously, but also even from before that. In 2014, I had covered the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and saw how much young black people had to do to prove, quote, their side of the story.

[00:16:49] Like, thousands of black people can testify that the cops were racist or cops were violent. And all that could be balanced by one statement from a police chief. And I remember participating in it. Doing these supposedly balanced news reports. So, OK, objective journalism, at least when it pretends to be neutral, can reinforce racist ideas and maybe always has. But that still didn't answer my question of why we even had objective journalism in the first place.

[00:17:38] David Mindich, his book, Just the Facts, explains that in Ida B Wells time the whole idea of balance in journalism was still pretty new and changing fast.

[00:17:49] Journalists were among the most partisan people in America. In the 1820s and early 1830s.

[00:17:56] For a lot of the 1800s a journalist slash activist or an editor slash political candidate was relatively normal.

[00:18:03] There were people who were newspaper editors, but there were also planning riots and they were also encouraging election violence and election fraud.

[00:18:16] And many newspapers were straight up funded by political parties. But from the 1830s on, boatloads of immigrants were coming to the U.S., literacy was on the rise and the newspaper industry responded by creating a new kind of urban publication, the Penny paper, not funded by political parties, but by sales and advertising.

[00:18:38] And to do so, they had to shed their partisan baggage and try to sell as many papers as possible and sell advertisements. And to do so, they had to become politically independent and rely on trying to reach a broad audience rather than just one political party or another.

[00:19:01] So he says what we now call objectivity developed partly because of this new business model. Journalists were trying to be more detached, nonpartisan, balanced and also more factual, which reflected cultural shifts to.

[00:19:16] Instead of relying on, let's say, a religious worldview or superstitions or beliefs, journalists began to care more and more about empiricism, the firsthand investigation of the world around them.

[00:19:31] But all this happened gradually. Some journalists tried to be factual, but weren't at all nonpartisan or balanced. And just like today, these values meant something really different, depending on whom you asked, which is what brought Mindich to study lynching and Ida B. Wells.

[00:19:48] The process of professionalization and objectivity that was occurring through the white press in many cases was inappropriate in the African-American press because the African-American press needed to tell a story and be advocates for a perspective that wasn't being told at all in the mainstream press.

[00:20:11] Led by Ida B Wells, the black press was trying to get the word out.

[00:20:15] That African-Americans were being lynched as part of economic terrorism, as a way to intimidate business people and perpetrated through a great lie that African-Americans were somehow culpable when in fact they were innocent victims.

[00:20:32] So then, a lot like now, complicity with white supremacy in the white press was purportedly just being neutral. While telling the truth, what Welles and other black journalists did was considered activism. In 1893 the New York Times editorial page Caldwell's a quote, slanderous and nasty minded mulattress and suggested she was fabricating facts.

[00:21:00] Objectivity is the ideology of the status quo. It is.

[00:21:04] This is my collaborator, the producer of The View from Somewhere podcast, Ramona Martinez. When we met, she had also been researching the story of Ida B Wells, and she had also left public radio. She used to work for NPR producing the newscast, you know, live from NPR News in Washington, I'm so-and-so. And she had thought a lot about the problems of objectivity. When we first met she said this thing to me about objectivity being the ideology of the status quo. I kept thinking about it. So I followed up with her later.

[00:21:38] And so unpack it a little. What do you mean when you say objectivity is the ideology of the status quo?

[00:21:45] I am starting out from the understanding that an objective viewpoint is impossible because we all have something called ideology, like a system of ideas and values that we interpret the world through. And like no matter who you are, the way you're going to see the world and form opinions and even things that you think are true are or are factual or based on like your background. Right.

[00:22:10] So if you can never escape ideology, therefore what is considered objective or neutral is like really only a matter of like social agreement or like the ideological consensus of the majority or the status quo.

[00:22:27] Which is easy to go along with if you agree with the social agreement like objectivity as the ideology of the status quo is easy to accept if the status quo reflects your experience and your identity.

[00:22:44] Exactly. So to give a concrete example, if I were living in, you know, the turn of the century and I were a suffragette, I'd be like, hey, women are just as smart as men and we deserve to, like, be in politics. But that viewpoint would have been considered like extreme and nonobjective.

[00:23:03] Right. And you, Ramona, I have a lot of experience with this because you worked at sort of the mothership of quote unquote objective news journalism NPR Newscast desk for quite a while. Right. So how did that play out? Like how did you come to all of this while you're working in that environment?

[00:23:20] Most stories would kind of come and go without too much thought because, you know, we edit gosh, we intake so many stories and hour. But in 2014, I remember after the Supreme Court ruled on the Hobby Lobby decision, just a recap really quick. They ruled that businesses were allowed to use sort of their religious freedom or their religious values to not provide employees with birth control, which was mandated under Obamacare.

[00:23:50] And I was so upset by this decision that I posted on my Facebook. SCOTUS, you mother f&%ker [beep].

[00:23:59] I saw that on my Facebook. NPR has a very strict ethics policy that makes it so that you cannot express political views on any kind of social media, including Facebook. Luckily, it was my, I was a first time offender, so I only got a wrist slap and a talking to and I guess, like, I felt like I couldn't as a woman publicly hold the view that I should have bodily autonomy and work for NPR.

[00:24:27] And so at what point does your role as a reporter or in your case a producer of news conflict with just your own humanity? If you're one of the people who's being targeted or whose body is being controlled in a certain way?

[00:24:45] Absolutely. And that's what I said to the person I was speaking to was. Well, what happens when they overturn Roe v. Wade? Am I going to have to choose between, you know, going to, like, lie in the street versus having a job? And he's like, yeah, I guess we're all going to have to make those choices.

[00:25:03] But what I realized was like, no, you're never going to have to make that choice, man. You're never going to have to make that choice.

[00:25:14] Right. You're never going to have to make that choice. If your ideas, your identity and experiences fit neatly into the mainstream idea of what's acceptable, which is all about who has power, whose stories get told and believed. Which is all about race and gender and class and ability. Ramona and I came across a really useful framework for talking about that range of acceptable debate. It's called Hallin's Spheres of Consensus.

[00:25:44] Yeah, I love Hallin's Spheres.

[00:25:46] This is David Mindich again, the journalism professor from Temple.

[00:25:50] So Daniel Hallin, who wrote a book called The Uncensored War, which is about the Vietnam War, looked at objective journalism through painting three concentric spheres.

[00:26:04] So picture an inner circle, a middle circle and a big outer circle.

[00:26:10] The inner most sphere was called the the sphere of consensus. And it's the it's the area that we all agree on.

[00:26:17] So from the American perspective, we all agree that apple pie is a good thing and baseball is a good thing.

[00:26:25] Well, I don't know if we all agree, but the sphere of consensus can also be summed up as dominant ideology. Things like capitalism is good. Patriotism is good. Opinions you could probably say on the news and not get reprimanded or fired. The middle circle is called the sphere of legitimate controversy.

[00:26:45] In the sphere of legitimate controversy is the area in which things are debated. So if you look at a typical news story about, let's say, tax policy or abortion rights, there are a bunch of different competing ideas that get put in the sphere of legitimate controversy. That's the the sphere that the news story is reflected in.

[00:27:11] So that includes stuff like Democrats versus Republicans. Debates over constitutional rights. How much taxation these days? Gay rights. And then there's my personal favorite sphere.

[00:27:22] The outer sphere, the third sphere, is called the sphere of deviance. And Hallin says those are the ideas that really don't make it into a news story.

[00:27:34] So if you did a story about a murder case, you wouldn't say we really need a pro murder view.

[00:27:43] But this deviant outside sphere could include all kinds of things. For example, when I came out as queer and transgender in the late 1990s, the idea that there are more than two genders was very much in the sphere of deviance, which meant in mainstream media it just wasn't talked about or debated. And what's really important is that what is in these spheres changes over time.

[00:28:07] So if you look back at the 19th century, the sphere of consensus included for many the idea that slavery was a positive good. Then slavery moved into the sphere of legitimate controversy. And finally now, to get a proslavery view, you wouldn't really find that in a in a current news story because proslavery has slipped into the sphere of of deviance for the last hundred years.

[00:28:43] It has been de platformed, you might say.

[00:28:45] Yes, yes. In D platform does a good way of phrasing it.