

All the Opinions Fit to Print?¹

Every day for more than a century, the *New York Times* masthead has proudly proclaimed, “All the News Fit to Print,” reminding readers, sources, advertisers, and employees of the news organization’s commitment to impartiality, balance, and fairness. In early June, 2020, editorial page editor James Bennett was forced to resign, and deputy editorial page editor Jim Dao was reassigned to the newsroom, leaving some people to wonder if all opinions were fit to print.

An opinion piece written by Senator Tom Cotton (R-AK), published in the June 3, 2020 issue of the *Times*, had sparked the controversy leading to Bennett’s resignation. Cotton expressed his view that the US military should be deployed to quiet the civil unrest in the country at that time. Protesters were demanding federal and state response to the newest wave of police killings of black men. Cotton accused radicals, rioters, and Antifa for promoting anarchy among the Black Lives Matter protesters. Senator Cotton encouraged President Trump to invoke the Insurrection Act and send in the military to deal with US civilian citizens. “One thing above all else will restore order to our streets: an overwhelming show of force to disperse, detain and ultimately deter lawbreakers.”² Some readers and many NYT employees were horrified by the op-ed piece, claiming that the Senator’s language was overly dramatic and dangerous. Some felt that publishing such opinions could lead to further violent outcry among citizens who felt unheard and vulnerable. *Times* employees signed a letter which said, in part, “We believe [Senator Cotton’s] message undermines the work we do, in the newsroom and in opinion, and violates our standards for ethical and accurate reporting for the public’s interest.”³

The New York Times’ apology for publishing the essay appeared within days of the op-ed’s publication and continues to be attached to the piece on the news organization’s [website](#). The newspaper took responsibility for not challenging overstatements and for writing a provocative headline to accompany the piece.

Critics of the *Times* say that the news organization caved in to reader and employee backlash. They point out that the newsroom, which indeed is dedicated to balanced and accurate reporting, is different from the editorial offices, which has the responsibility of providing a diversity of opinion on timely matters. They think that readers of the *New York Times* should know the positions that their elected officials hold, even if a position is not popular or trades more on emotion than fact. Critics charge that leadership’s response reveals the news organization’s liberal bias.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is there a morally relevant distinction between written and spoken media that is political and controversial in nature?
2. What responsibilities do news publications have to their audiences? In what ways should they regulate and limit the views that get expressed in their editorial venues?
3. How should editors balance the need to represent a diversity of views with the danger of giving voice to views that may have a foreseeable risk of misinformation or incitement?

¹ A previous version of this case appears in the APPE Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl’s 2021 National Case Set. It is reproduced here with permission. For more information about APPE IEB, visit <https://www.appe-ethics.org/about-ethics-bowl>.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/opinion/tom-cotton-protests-military.html>

³ <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/06/new-york-times-employees-rebel-against-tom-cotton-send-in-the-troops-op-ed>