

Just the Facts

On May 19, 2021, journalist Emily Wilder was fired from the *Associated Press* after three weeks on the job.¹ Wilder, who is Jewish, was fired after right-wing media sources began publicizing her involvement in pro-Palestine activism in college, and drew attention to tweets she had made about the topic.² In late May 2021, Alexis Johnson was told by her employer, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, that she would not be allowed to cover the Black Lives Matter movement. Johnson, who is Black, was told this was because she had demonstrated bias in a tweet that she had posted the day before.³ Felicia Sonmez was banned in 2018 from reporting on cases dealing with rape and sexual assault at her job at the *Washington Post* after she wrote about her experience as a survivor of sexual violence.⁴

Some people see these actions by news organizations as justified measures to protect the objectivity of the reporting in question. News organizations should strive for objectivity, and this is impossible when the person reporting has made it clear that they have strong personal views on the matter. Most reporters have opinions about the things they report on. However, they are expected to put these opinions to one side while they are reporting. It is inconsistent and irresponsible, one might argue, only to prevent those who are public about their opinions (or, in the case of Sonmez, their experiences) from reporting on controversial issues. It may also constitute discrimination.⁵

What is better, say critics of objectivity, is to report the facts while also acknowledging one's (limited and biased) point of view. This is a sign of humility, and it may also have the benefit of opening up more ethical reporting standards. Perhaps shrugging off the myth of objectivity would release journalists from lending undue credence to what they take to be morally problematic stances, in the name of remaining neutral.⁶

However, if objectivity and neutrality are completely discarded, some worry that this would effectively mean the end of fact-based reporting. This brings to the fore another important issue: trust. If media consumers find out that a story was written by someone who has an undisclosed personal stake in the matter, this might erode the trustworthiness of the reporting or the news outlet. This, according to Felicia Sonmez, is the reason that she was not allowed to cover stories involving sexual assault. "The reason I've repeatedly been given by senior editors," she said in a tweet, "is that they are worried about the 'appearance of a conflict of interest' if they allow me to write on sexual assault. They've told me they don't believe there's an actual conflict, or even that my writing would be biased in any way."⁷ Thus, even if Sonmez can report responsibly on these issues, perhaps she should not be permitted to do so, given the fact that some readers might believe her to be untrustworthy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do news organizations have an ethical duty to maintain a certain relationship to the general public? If so, what is the nature of that relationship?
2. In which contexts, if any, is it permissible for employers to restrict (or impose consequences for) their employees' speech outside of work hours?
3. What, if any, is the value of objectivity in journalism?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/business/media/emily-wilder-associated-press-ap.html?searchResultPosition=2>

² <https://www.mediaite.com/news/associated-press-reporter-out-after-conservatives-flag-pro-palestine-activism-in-college/>

³ <https://www.thecut.com/2020/06/black-reporter-barred-from-covering-blm-protests-over-bias.html>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/30/washington-post-felicia-sonmez-sexual-assault-sexism>

⁵ <https://lawandcrime.com/high-profile/washington-post-reporter-sues-the-newsroom-and-marty-baron-for-discrimination-claiming-she-was-punished-after-sexual-assault-disclosure/>

⁶ <https://medium.com/@lewispants/objectivity-is-dead-and-im-okay-with-it-7fd2b4b5c58f>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/feliciasonmez/status/1376274971207602184>

