Opinion

News



(Unsplash/Stephan Valentin)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

June 12, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Editors' Note: This column has been updated to clarify that the New York Times did not unpublish the Cotton column, but rather indicated that they regretted publishing it.

The controversy over The New York Times decision to publish an op-ed by Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton is not the kind of easy call most First Amendment issues turn out to be. I have heard people whom I respect forcefully argue both sides of the case, and I am inclined to remain ambivalent.

The culture that supports a free press rightly demands that newspapers act responsibly. And, in President Donald Trump, all media outlets have faced an unexpected and unwanted quandary: How do you deal with a newsmaker who routinely traffics in lies and conspiracy theories? How do you avoid normalizing his craziness while reporting what he says?

His first full day in office, Trump sent Sean Spicer out to lie about something that was easily disproven, the size of the crowd at the inauguration. The message was clear: The president has the power to make other people lie for him. Media outlets were reluctant at first to even apply the word "lie" to demonstrably false claims, and yet it was obvious the "point-counterpoint" approach was not working. Inviting on an ally of the president felt like suborning perjury. These conundrums were the backdrop for the decision to publish Cotton's op-ed and then to publish an apology, and sack the editorial page editor.

Advertisement

David Roberts at Vox notes no newspaper would print an op-ed advocating a return to chattel slavery:

> That slavery is abhorrent is taken as a background assumption informing coverage, not a subject of legitimate debate in which both sides deserve a hearing.

> So the question is where are the boundaries and, just as importantly, who draws them? Who decides what is in bounds and out of bounds? Is it the press's job to draw those lines and defend those boundaries?

Racism is, for most Americans, also abhorrent but there remains wide disagreement about how to define it and how to confront it.

There is a good case to be made that the Times failed in its initial decision to publish Cotton's piece. Certain assertions of fact were wrong: his reference to "cadres of left-wing radicals like antifa," for example. At CNN, Steven Holmes argues that the Times' reporting was unclear about the role of outside groups, but the antifa thesis is not just a claim that might be counter-factual. It is a conspiracy theory. God invented editors to go back to writers and ask for evidence about disputed factual claims, and in this case, they should have insisted on removing it not just because it is likely wrong, but because it brings with it associations that are wildly inflammatory and were designed to be wildly inflammatory. Antifa in Trump's America is what "communists in the State Department" were in Joe McCarthy's America.

In apologizing for running for the piece, the editors said, "Beyond those factual questions, the tone of the essay in places is needlessly harsh and falls short of the thoughtful approach that advances useful debate." Tone? Especially on the central issue at hand, people's feelings are raw and conveying that rawness is a good thing, not a bad thing for an editorial page.

What is worse, Ben Smith reports that the internal revolt against the decision to publish the essay may have been decisive. He writes:

> On Wednesday evening around 7:30, hours after the column was posted, Times employees began tweeting a screenshot of Mr. Cotton's essay, most with some version of the sentence: "Running this puts Black @nytimes staff in danger." The NewsGuild of New York later advised staff members that that formulation was legally protected speech because it focused on workplace safety.

> God invented editors to go back to writers and ask for evidence about disputed factual claims, and in this case, they should have insisted on removing it not just because it is likely wrong, but because it brings with it

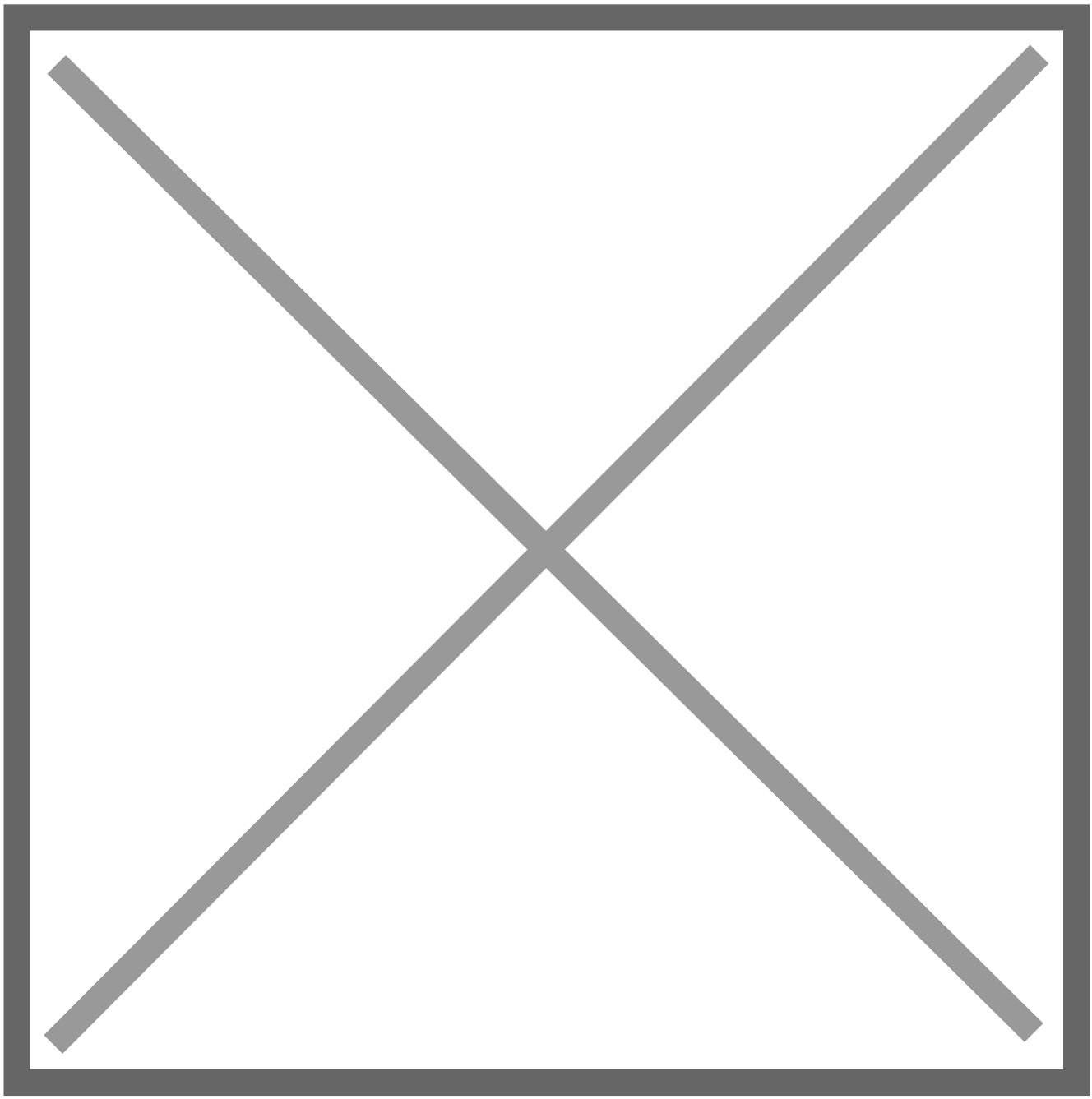
> associations that are wildly inflammatory and were designed to be wildly inflammatory.
>
> Tweet this

To be sure, while all members of the human race were traumatized by the video of George Floyd's murder — or should have been — it undoubtedly traumatized black people differently and deeper than whites. While I'm not a parent, my heart goes out to anyone with a child. I can't imagine the difficulty of being a black parent having to explain to their child that, yes, horrible things can happen to them simply because they are black. And white parents in this moment can't escape having to explain to their children that people exist who think they can do these terrible things because they consider themselves superior because of the color of their skin.

This Twitter campaign, however, sounds manipulative. Workplace safety? Were their laptops going to blow up? Some of the Times staff who raised the issue may have feared for their safety. Cotton, after all, is advocating use of military against American citizens, a horrible idea in any era. In this moment, it can only be viewed as, additionally, a racially charged suggestion. However, reporters go into dangerous places all the time. CNN's Omar Jimenez, who is black, was improperly arrested by Minneapolis police and Kaitlin Rust, who is white, had pepper balls fired at her while reporting for WAVE 3 news in Louisville, Kentucky. At least 554 journalists have died in the last decade.

Most important, however, is a newspaper's duty to convey information and, in this instance, the overriding obligation was to allow citizens the benefit of knowing what Cotton is thinking. He is an elected official with access to the White House and conceivably an influence on the commander-in-chief. The Times was doing a public service to allow us to know, in his own words, the details of the senator's racist and irresponsible proposal.

The resignation of James Bennet as the Times' editorial page editor is troubling. It is difficult to see how this will not produce a chilling effect on editorial decision-making at the Times and elsewhere. Kathleen Parker made that point at The Washington Post, writing, "The Times's editorial page editor, James Bennet, once a potential executive editor candidate, resigned over what should have been a blip on the continuum of lessons learned. This unnecessary spectacle isn't only disappointing but also portends the gradual shrinking of the free marketplace of ideas."



Screenshot of the op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton on The New York Times' website (NCR screenshot)

Parker also pointed to the likely source of the outrage that forced out Bennet: "Rather than defending a U.S. senator's right to speak his mind, the Times bowed to outrage — an overindulged emotion in the age of safe spaces and trigger warnings." The foolishness of the modern university has dangerously entered into the life of the nation. College campuses with "safe zones" and "speech codes" have become some

of the most illiberal places in the country. Instead of leaving that nonsense behind, some enjoy the power that the words "I am offended" apparently convey. If they were still in school, I would assign a reading of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s magnificent essay "Let them talk," which confronted both the First Amendment absolutists and the proponents of banning "hate speech."

None of us should want to live in a country where only "acceptable" opinions get published. We need editors willing to take risks, and sometimes make mistakes, without worrying that they will lose their livelihood, not those committed to preserving an echo chamber of the ideological left or right. I happen to be a fan of orthodoxy in matters religious, but in matters of opinion, orthodoxy is an editor's enemy. Those who find comfort in it should work at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, not The New York Times.

The president defines deviancy on a daily basis and nowhere is the effect of his deviancy worse than in the undermining of our society's understanding of and commitment to truth. The late, great Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts." The line between the two has been blurred by the president. That does not let the Times off the hook for its decision to publish Cotton's op-ed, nor for its decision to say it regretted publishing it, but it will be a great day for democracy when we have someone in the White House who is not a congenital liar. Then we can get back to the important, robust discussion of how to determine what is true, and what to do with the truth when we discern it.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*