

Advanced Studies in Journalism: Journalistic Courage

The 2015 McGill Program

Rachel Elizabeth Eubanks

Quiet Courage: Journalistic Courage and Intersectional Identities

Part One

Bruce Wilder graduated from the University of Georgia in 1940. Originally from Royston, Georgia, he went on to work for the *Columbus Ledger* and the *Sunday Ledger-Enquirer*, eventually becoming associate editor. Bruce Wilder did what many communications students hope to do – graduate and become full-time journalists – all while living with muscular dystrophy.

As found in an [archived article](#) originally printed in *Reader's Digest* in 1951, John Drewry, former dean of Grady College, recommended Wilder to the editor of the *Ledger* despite his disability. Dean Drewry believed that Bruce could work full-time even with a condition that left him with a “devastated and skeletonized” body bound to a wheelchair. Soon enough the editors of the paper realized that Bruce handled better copy than anybody else on the desk and his coworkers forgot about his condition. They saw Bruce as a journalist rather than as a man with disability.

In an [article](#) from the *Chicago Tribune*, we know that Wilder worked right up until muscular dystrophy took its course upon his body at the age of thirty-two. Bruce even published an editorial on the condition three days before it took his life, but never showed that he suffered from the disease through his writing.

Emerging journalists have lifetimes worth of experience to learn from veterans who have exhibited courage in their work, but courage may not always come in the form of war reporting or putting oneself in the path of political risk. The everyday reporter exhibits courage in his or her pursuits, but in perhaps a quieter fashion, as Wilder did in his work with the *Ledger*. Bruce Wilder’s life exemplified the way journalists must work with quiet courage in order to move past the social, physical and mental limitations of their identities.

- What types of unique challenges do gay and lesbian journalists, journalists with disabilities, trans journalists and journalists of color experience? Provide some examples of journalists whose identities have pushed them to exhibit courage in their media work.
- What are the ways in which journalists must exhibit courage in combating the limitations of their personal identities in their work?
- What possible steps could journalism schools, professional organizations and publications take to lower these types of personal barriers for emerging journalists?

Part Two

In November of 2015, Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump [mocked a New York Times reporter](#) with a physical disability at a rally in South Carolina. “The sad part about it is, it didn't in the slightest bit jar or surprise me that Donald Trump would do something this low-rent,” the journalist, Serge Kovalski, explained after Trump impersonated his physical impairment, a result of a condition called arthrogryposis.

Sometimes, typically by accident, journalists become the subjects of their own stories. This became the case for *Times* reporter Serge Kovalski, for student photojournalist [Tim Tai](#) at the University of Missouri after a clash over First Amendment rights with student protesters, and for journalists like [Janet Mock](#). Mock, a trans woman and writer for *Marie Claire* magazine, spoke to Poynter in 2014 about how others have considered her a token trans person and pressured her to act as a primary representative for that specific community in professional media. She insisted that she will “not just be thrown into a corner as the trans correspondent,” but instead use her identity to inform her writing rather than letting her gender impose social restrictions on her professional work.

Those whose identities make them part of marginalized or oppressed communities must exhibit courage in everyday life, not only with microaggressions in interpersonal interactions, but also in large-scale, systemic injustices that affect socioeconomic status and job opportunities. As a [Washington Post article](#) explains, intersectional identities “encompass a number of additional social factors — sexual orientation, nationality, class, disability and others” beyond how the term intersectionality “was originally used...to describe how race and gender could intersect as forms of oppression.” The experiences of a black female journalist or a reporter with a disability differ greatly from the work environment for a white male journalist, but a free press should encourage a variety of viewpoints and offer support to those whose voices may easily be suppressed because of their identities.

- How can journalists in historically oppressed cultural and social groups use their identities to advocate for others in their communities?
- How do journalists with intersectional identities exhibit courage in their reporting, creating a public forum for marginalized groups? Examples?
- How could the media industry provide journalists with support and training necessary to combat on-the-job discrimination and aggression? Is this the job of individual publications? Industry organizations?
- Why might it be important for communications schools to teach journalism students about historically marginalized people groups? What types of curriculum requirements could be helpful in educating future communicators about intersectionality?

Part Three

African-American journalist Alice Dunnigan became the subject of news stories when President Eisenhower ignored her for asking questions concerning civil rights issues during her time in the press corps, according to an excerpt from her autobiography on [Nieman Reports](#). “Mr. President ignored me. He would recognize people all around me, in front of me, in back of me, on either side, but he always left me standing like the invisible man,” Dunnigan wrote. Alice Dunnigan’s identity as “the first black female reporter accredited to the White House” came with its set of challenges, requiring her to exhibit journalistic courage. Dunnigan insisted on asking Eisenhower questions that would benefit her audience even though the president regarded her as a nuisance, as he eventually completely ceased to call on her during news conferences. But the journalist’s persistence paid off and her story exhibits “an incredible climb to the highest sanctums of a white-male dominated profession as the first black woman accredited to the White House, the Capitol Press Galleries, and the U.S. Supreme Court.”

- How would most reporters respond to blatant discrimination such as the treatment Alice Dunnigan faced?
- What type of supportive structure could publications provide to prepare journalists to face and respond to discrimination?
- How might independent reporters or freelancers find support in facing discrimination in the field?

Journalism students at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication are prepared with a diverse variety of skills before walking across the stage at commencement — skills such as gathering social media metric data, telling stories in visually captivating ways and writing in a clear, concise and journalistic manner. But one skill that can’t easily be described in a course outline is the skill to take one’s self outside of a story — to act foremost as a transparent conduit between the public and the news citizens must know to make sound political and social decisions. This professional form of self-denial can be obtained once journalists know themselves, their audiences and their roles as proprietors of democracy. This skill is a form of untold journalistic courage.