

An Interview with Terry Neal

1. My class this semester has been dedicated to learning about the history of journalism and seeing it develop over time. The best thing about knowing our history, is that we can learn from our mistakes and it is no secret that journalists have made mistakes in the past. However, journalists are human and are likely to slip up every now and again. Has there ever been a moment in your career as a journalist where you either realized you told a story wrong or the news organization you worked for has? If yes, how did you address it or go about fixing it?
 - You are certainly right that journalists are human beings and do make mistakes. In the nearly 20 years I was a journalist, I had to write a few corrections. But I'm happy to say, that with more than 1,500 bylines to my name, I never had an entire story that I needed to retract or any errors that undermined the entire point of the story. Most of my errors were more routine things like misspellings, or getting someone's job title wrong, or getting someone's name wrong or whatever. Having said that, in the early 2000s, after I'd been a hard news reporter for about a dozen years, I was given a job as the Washington Post's first full-time political columnist for washingtonpost.com. It was the first time I was allowed to infuse opinion into my writing, as it was a column. There are plenty of people who disagreed with opinions I expressed or accused me of bias. Having said that, there's honestly nothing I regret writing.
2. During your time as a journalist your job was to communicate to the public and your position now at Burson Cohn and Wolfe has you helping companies, organizations and people tell their stories. How has your own experience in communication provided insight on how to help others in their own public affairs? Is there any universal advice that you always share with your clients?
 - My being trained and grounded in journalism drives everything I do as a communications consultant. Journalists see the world through a unique lens. They see their role as one of watchdogs for consumers, voters, citizens in general. Their goal (for the good ones anyway) is to cut through the lies, clutter and BS to get to the truth. Then communicate that truth in a way that is straight forward, easy to understand and fair. Often my clients are confused about what news even is. And it just so happens, most people are. I help my clients better understand how journalists and newsrooms work, so they can have more success telling their stories to them.
3. Is there any one story you have written that has stuck with you to this day?
 - There are many. But probably the story that has stuck with me the most – not necessarily the most important, but the one that meant the most to me – was a story I did my junior year at the University of Missouri-Columbia's Missourian newspaper, a city daily run by the J School. The story was about a man named Matthew Tyler, who at the time, was one of the highest-ranking black administrators at the university. He was also the most prominent black clergyman in the city of Columbia. To make a long story short, in my sophomore year, in my Newswriting 101 we got an assignment to write a personality profile on an accomplished person either at the University or in the town. I chose Matthew. I set up an interview in his office in the main administrative building. I interviewed him for about an hour. When we were done, he asked me if we could chat off the record for a bit. He told me he was

working toward his doctorate in psychology. And also as a clergyman with a master's in divinity, he considered counseling young people one of his most important life mission. He asked me if he could ask some questions of me and that I should feel comfortable confiding even my most personal secrets to him. I was young then, and it took me to realize that he trying to groom me. At then end, he asked me a totally inappropriate question and I literally ran out of his office. I sat on this for a year, not telling anyone. Being ashamed and wondering what it was I could have done to encourage that kind of talk. Finally, my junior year, I confided in a close friend of mine, also a young AA student. He told me the same thing had happened to him, and he told me of three other young black students who'd had similar or worse experiences. We went our editor at the Missourian and told her we wanted to start an investigation for the paper. We worked for about three months and our reporting revealed that not only was Matthew a serial harasser of young, black male students, but that there were also accusations in the community that Matthew had abused minor boys from his church. We wrote a huge investigative piece that ended in Matthew's firing and a police investigation that was later dropped. We found out that Matthew had been accused of the same thing at LSU before coming to Mizzou. He had a talent for getting out of trouble, slinking away and disappearing before showing up at another school (this was pre-Internet days). I went on to graduate a year later. But breaking this story impressed upon me the awesome responsibility a journalist has and the awesome ability to affect change for the better. I lost track of Matthew after I graduated. I had no idea where he went. Then 12 years later, I was a reporter covering the Bush presidential campaign in 2000, when I got a call from the DA in Milwaukee. Matthew Tyler had been arrested for molesting underage boys. After leaving Mizzou, he made his way to Wisconsin and got a job, if I remember correctly, at a Boys & Girls club (or it may have been YMCA). He told me they were going to subpoena me to come to Milwaukee to testify against him in the case. Typically journalists don't want to be involved in testifying in cases they've covered. But I decided not to fight the subpoena. A few weeks later, the prosecutor called me back and said there would be no need to testify. When Matthew saw that I was on the testimony list, he pleaded guilty in a plea bargain. He served many years in prison, thankfully. It all reminds me of what MLK said: "The moral arc of the university is long. But it bends toward justice." It meant a lot to me that I was able to play a role in that justice.

4. As a society we are progressing more and more to only having a media and online presence. However, it is said every couple of years that newspapers will die off and yet they are still being produced. Do you believe we will ever completely switch from paper to technology, or are newspapers and magazines a timeless production that will never die?

■ That's a tricky question. Without a doubt, the reality of people reading actual newspapers that they hold in their hands is on its death knell. But many of the news organizations are thriving, finally figuring out nearly three decades into the internet age, how to monetize their products online. The big national pubs – NYT, WSJ, WP, USA Today – are all thriving with growing online audiences and refined ad strategies. The regional papers are struggling, with many abandoning their print editions but still struggling with their online strategies. But here's the thing...Even as newspapers struggle, the media itself has never been larger. There are literally thousands of online

only publications, blogs, etc. that didn't exist 30, 20 or 10 years ago. Many of those are hyper-local news publications and aggregators that are doing just fine. So the death of newspapers should never be equated with the death of media.

5. And lastly of course, if you had to give an aspiring journalist one piece of advice, what would it be?

- Think for yourself. Don't be a copycat. Just because another journalist wrote it, don't take it for gospel. You don't have to assume it's wrong either. Just have an open mind. You don't have to accept conventional wisdom if you see evidence to the contrary. Have an open mind, but also have a value system. Know the difference between right and wrong and hold yourself to the highest standards of excellence and objectivity when trying to get to the truth. And always remember, a square is always a rectangle. But a rectangle is not always a square. In other words, all journalists are in the media. But not all who are in the media are journalists.