

Jay Rosen: Thank you and thanks very much to the Eisenhower Foundation for organizing this, it's very much an honor for me to be here because of the importance of this subject.

I have one criticism to offer the people to offer the people from Eisenhower, and one big idea to share with you and then a bunch of little ideas.

Modern reporting on race and poverty begins at the turn of the century with Jacob Riis in New York whose book *How The Other Half Lives* is still available. And that book was about the very depressing and extreme poverty in the Lower East Side in New York, and how the other half lives in the city. And it was accompanied by photographs and detailed descriptions of life in what was then a ghetto.

And the logic of this journalism was not just that the scene of poverty would be described, it was by describing it, Jacob Riis would reach the people on the Upper East Side of New York who had the money and had the influence and it would be their reaction, their sympathy, their guilt that might cause something to be done about what Riis had uncovered.

And the criticism that I have to offer is that 100 or more years later, I think this is still the implicit model that we're working with. The idea that by illuminating desperate conditions people of wealth and influence will react sympathetically and re-make those conditions.

And it's not that such a thing never happens, it does occasionally happen, but that's not a very good description of how politics works, it's not a very good description of how public policy works, it's not a good description of how the media works, and by expecting a kind of continuous replay of Jacob Riis, we don't really describe the world very well.

And so I would ask the people at Eisenhower to question that model, and ask if they could come up with something better than that, because the world is a lot more complicated than that.

I come to this forum very pessimistic about what race means to journalism. I think reality-based policy, reality-based politics, reality-based executive branch behavior has all taken a major hit over the last few years, and this is a city in recovery from that and still in shock and in slow recovery from a totally unexpected event. Which is that the very levers of government were taken over by people who actually staged a retreat from empiricism as the journalist Ron Suskind has said.

That there could be a politics like that, that actually generated power from a retreat from reality, is I think a unexpected event that no political scientist expected, and has overtaken American journalism as well.

To go back to the roots of that development, you would have to go back a very long way, shortly after Jacob Riis when American journalism, modern American journalism emerged in its professionalized form which was during the 1920's and 1930's. And the origins of objectivity and the journalism today we derisively call he said/she said journalism were, in a kind of grand bargain that was made, when journalists decided that they needed to become more professional, and that's a development that began in the 1920's and 1930's with your first professional associations that accelerated greatly after World War II and picked up a lot of steam in the 1960's and 1970's.

But the original bargain was between the reporters and writers, on the one hand, and owners and operators of newspapers on the other. And the bargain was something like this: You guys -- reporters and writers -- give up your politics. Give up any personal voice, give up -- what today we would call -- your bias. And in exchange, we'll give you kind of a stable job in which you can report on the world and tell people about it, and you can claim a certain status and role within American life based on that very limited job of reporting, and if you give up your politics, give up your voice, give up any sort of avowed belief system, any true passion, this will be good for us, because we'll be able to market news to everybody -- not just the people who agree with you -- and we'll be able to draw lots of advertisers, we don't continually be angering them with our politics in the news pages, and everybody will get better. You'll gain more status, we'll gain more advertisers, we'll be able to reach all of the people in the community -- don't you want to reach all of the people in the community -- and you'll be able to become a higher status craft, we'll be able to become richer and more powerful.

And this grand bargain basically worked for a long time. And one of the consequences of it is what we could call the de-voicing of American journalism, or mainstream American journalism. And this is a very consequential event that most journalists that are working today came in at the fifth or sixth act of that play. That's already been well-established by the time they entered the field. And there have been breaks in that system, but on the whole, it has operated.

Now, in the de-voicing of American journalism, in the professional model, there are constant threats to this model. Because every journalist hired is potentially disruptive. Every journalist hired potentially will allow their own voice, their own politics to break through into the news. And so you need a lot of discipline, you need a lot of rules, you need a lot of routines for maintaining this grand bargain, and those routines are actually what young journalists learn, they learn to negotiate those things as they move through the news pages.

In the 1970's and 1980's a bunch of very bright sociologists went into American newsrooms and they studied how journalists make decisions. They hung out there, and they interviewed the people, and they observed how they worked. And they tried to make sense of what they were seeing. And they certainly observed the de-voicing of journalists, and they observed another thing -- which is that the news is a very improvised thing. Every 24 hours you have to re-make the world, and you're doing so with limited information and limited knowledge. And you get a lot of things wrong. And a lot of things that are arguable make it into the news as information.

And because of all of those defects, all of those imperfections, the news and the people who make it are extremely open to criticism, they are open to being attacked and criticized, with grounds. And therefore they develop routines and rituals to protect themselves against this criticism. And what we call he said/she said journalism is one of those, the ritual of balance is one of those. Only quote the experts is another one, the search for authorized knowers who are already empowered to speak in the news is another one.

And so this is my one big idea for you. Alongside the search for information in journalism, there is constantly a larger search, and that is for innocence, a search for

innocence. Meaning, I'm innocent of politics, I'm innocent of ideology, I have no agenda, I don't have a belief system, I'm just telling you the way it is, so believe me because I am innocent.

And so one of the reasons why there's been this decline in coverage, why has there been such poor coverage of a troublesome and difficult issue like poverty, is that there's no innocence in it. There's no innocence to be won by covering it. And this search, the need to replicate and constantly advertise your innocence is sometimes more important than the search for information, but journalists don't talk about that part because it's faintly embarrassing and we don't teach it that way in journalism schools, we just teach them the routines, we teach them the rituals.

Finally, I want to make one more point about newsroom diversity, which we've heard a great deal about so far, and we'll probably hear more about as we move on.

It's true that after the Kerner Commission the news business decided that it had to become a lot more diverse, there has been some success in bringing many more minorities into the newsroom, not as many as advocates think should be there, they haven't been as successful in generating leaders in a newsroom and bosses, but within that project, which has been going on now for more than 30 years, there was a contradiction that was never resolved.

And the contradiction is this: if we hire more African-Americans into the newsroom, it has to be because we think their perspective is valuable, their voice is needed, that's the whole logic of it. We need what you know, we need your background, we need your insights, we need your outlook.

But when they get there, they find a system in which that is exactly what should be bleached out of the news. Your personal background, your personal voice, your personal perspective -- because of the de-voicing of American journalism.

And so welcoming into the newsroom people whose perspectives were supposedly needed, but making them learn a system in which their perspective is supposed to be left out, you simply send people right into the jaws of a giant contradiction. And for the individual practitioner, for the individual journalist, the way this is felt is you want to both help your newspaper report on your community and inform it of what you might know, by let's say, growing up black or growing up in the city. At the same time, the last thing you want to be labeled as is just a black reporter. Just good for connecting with an alienated constituency.

And so, do I want to be a black reporter? Or do I want to be just a professional reporter? You don't want to be pigeon-holed, you don't want to be ghetto-ized, but you don't want to ignore where you came from either. And the reason why individuals have to grapple with that unsolvable dilemma is that, in fact, newsroom diversity was founded on a contradiction in the first place. You bring voices into a de-voiced newsroom, you're asking for alienation and trouble.

So, my suggestion to the Eisenhower Foundation is that the world has gotten a lot more complicated since Jacob Riis was able to stir the conscience of wealthy people on the Upper East Side in New York, and you ought to incorporate that into your own ideas of how media policy works.

And to leave on an up note, the de-voicing of American journalism is the thing that's being reversed by the Internet. This is what now isn't necessary, because the Internet opening up the field, lowering barriers to entry has made it possible for journalists to begin to recover their voice, and maybe that will begin to address some of the problems that have brought us here today.