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Tim Tebow Is Jewish



By Marty Kaplan

“Should The Times Be a Truth Vigilante?”

That was the headline last week on a blog posted by *New York Times* public editor Arthur Brisbane.

Brisbane is the *Times*' ombudsman; his job is to hold the paper accountable to journalistic standards and to act as its readers' representative. The blog caused a lot of jaws to drop and tongues to wag. The reactions were either “duh” or “yikes.” Those in the first group were appalled that an arbiter of professional values was calling the very pursuit of accuracy into question; the others, pouncing on how the question was framed - “vigilante”? *really?* - read the headline as a sign that the propagandists charging “liberal bias” had succeeded in intimidating even the *Times*.

The headline, in other words, begged the question. Its implicit answer is that *Times* reporters should faithfully record what sources claim, and depict conflicting claims within the framework of he-said/she-said. An adroit reporter might juxtapose goofy claims with credible contrary evidence; an enterprising editor might assign a sidebar, within whose walls it's acceptable to check facts. But by and large, especially in the realm of politics and public affairs, this conception of journalism casts us as arbitrators in a dispute between warring press releases.

What kind of journalism would empower us as citizens instead of blowing us off with “we'll have to leave it there”? It would have to step up to two responsibilities, each of which carries risks, but ducking either one is as good as giving up on what a free press can do for democracy.

Take my headline, above. When I say that Tim Tebow is Jewish, I'm doing two things. One is making a factual claim. The other is pursuing an agenda. Journalism's job, I think, is to investigate both.

You can check whether Tim Tebow is Jewish (he's not), just like you can check whether Barack Obama was born in America (yup); whether the earth is 6,000 years old (nope); or whether the U.S. has the best health care system in the world (we're #37). There's a big chunk of rhetorical real estate to which the

words “true” and “false” can be appropriately applied. People who say that climate change is a hoax are wrong. So are people who say that taxes have gone through the roof in California.

Some assertions, like Mitt Romney’s claim that Bain Capital netted 100,000 new jobs, can be checked in principle, but not in reality, because Bain refuses to release the data needed to confirm or disprove it. That 100,000 is the equivalent of an ad for a male enhancement pill; a consumer warning is the least the media could provide. A reporter or host who fails to call a falsehood false - on the spot, within the story, in real time - is committing journalistic malpractice.

But fact-checking is just one part of the journalist’s job. The other is to help citizens understand the intention of the speaker, to expose the purpose of an assertion. When I say Tim Tebow is Jewish, my goal is to grab your attention. I know it’s not true. I’m lying.

The *mens rea* of a speaker - the intent to deceive - is fair game for journalism. It’s not enough to say that Sarah Palin and Chuck Grassley are factually wrong about “death panels”; an analysis of a disinformation campaign belongs in the story (as the *Times*, to its credit, provided). The lies Dick Cheney sold the *Times* about Saddam’s uranium centrifuges cried out for political deconstruction. Good reporting on the charges about Barack Obama by Donald Trump, Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich also requires reporting on their marketing campaigns for TV ratings, lecture fees and book sales. Motives matter.

Here’s how that works, when it works: After *Fox & Friends* followed the money trail from “Ground Zero mosque” builder Imam Rauf to Saudi prince and purported terrorist funder Al-Waleed bin Talal, not only did Jon Stewart point out that Al-Waleed is News Corp.’s largest shareholder; he also used that inconvenient truth to raise the key question about Fox News’s failure to mention the connection: Are they stupid, or evil? That’s not overstepping the bounds between journalism and partisanship; it’s reclaiming the ground that journalistic cowardice has ceded to partisanship. (And yes, I know that Jon Stewart calls himself a fake journalist, not a real one. But if that’s fake, then the Pulitzers need a new category.)

Sometimes motive is the most important part of a story. The significance of Mitt Romney’s re-invention of his record isn’t that he’s lying about the past; it’s that he will say and do anything to be president. He wants Tea Partiers to believe that he’s one of them, but he wants the rest of us think that he’s actually winking at us while pandering to them, and at the same time he wants the press to admire his feint-to-the-right/pivot-to-the-center strategy as a triumph in narrative-making. It’s not journalistically unprofessional to call Romney’s strategy cynical; it’s professionally derelict not to.

Stephen Colbert is also winking at us, but his meaning isn’t that we’re all in on the joke that money-fueled politics has become; it’s that our civic hair is on fire. When the *Times*’ public editor wonders whether verification is vigilantism, it’s a sign not only that the right’s 30-plus years of working the refs has succeeded, but also that the postmodern allergy to a category called “truth” is on the verge of being fatal to democracy. When Stewart and Colbert make motive the topic and analysis entertaining, I feel a tectonic shift - a promising one - in the ground of political storytelling.

Tim Tebow ain’t Jewish, but journalism ain’t stenography.