

Scoops and Other Revelations

The freedom to break “news” energizes journalism and democracy, but breaking new *ideas* often matters even more. Without them, the sheer glut of information would scramble old ways of thinking without generating any of the interpretations and public consensus we need to make sense of the news.

That presents journalists with a challenge. Reporters writing on tight deadlines have to rely on whatever story lines they already have in their heads, and these are yesterday’s conventional wisdom, making their “story” sensible enough — and saleable enough — to harried editors and to readers or viewers who want their preconceptions confirmed or at least accommodated.

But what if the events being reported defy and confound the conventional wisdom, as the attacks of 9/11 surely did? Serious journalists, like serious public leaders, try to lead as well as follow. That’s why journalism is called “the first rough draft of history.”

Journalists are looking not just for “news” but for better interpretive lenses or story lines that notice and explain new trends and challenges that the old wisdom overlooked. To make sound judgments quickly about what *really* matters as “news” in a maelstrom of new developments, they need to draw on historical memory and thinking that’s deep as well as clear.

Here are seven instances in my own experience where a little historical memory and some informed judgment benefited me and the public.

1. Exposing Election Fraud in an Historic Black Congressional Race.

The first instance is the most conventional. It was the first time I understood how to break news. It came on a Saturday morning in 1982, when I walked into the Brooklyn Board of Elections as a *Village Voice* writer and found supporters of Brooklyn State Senator Vander Beatty “checking” voter registration cards.

What they were really doing was forging signatures on the cards, which Beatty’s lawyers would then submit to a judge as evidence of fraud in his suit to invalidate a congressional Democratic primary election for the retiring Rep. Shirley Chisholm’s historic Bedford Stuyvesant seat, which Beatty had just lost to a far more worthy State Senate colleague, Major R. Owens. Beatty was going to submit his minions’ Saturday morning forgeries as evidence that Owens had rigged the votes on Election Day.

I hadn’t just stumbled upon those shenanigans at the Board of Elections. A political operative who knew people on both sides had called to tip me off. He didn’t need to explain much on the phone: A *Voice* cover story of mine on Beatty’s long record of corruption had been published before the primary and had played some role in Owens’ victory. Yet if I hadn’t rushed down to the Board that Saturday and known what I was seeing, Beatty would have won his suit in Brooklyn’s compliant (indeed, complicit), machine-dominated judiciary. Black politics in Chisholm’s district would have taken an emblematically disastrous turn. So a lot was at stake in

the new *Voice* story the following Wednesday. “Look at it this way,” said my tipster; “[Beatty] is either going to jail or he’s going to Congress.”

A classic povertycrat long indulged by a corrupt Democratic machine and a timid white liberal elite, Beatty had been endorsed in the primary by the *New York Times*. The party machine’s hack judges did rule for him in the local and appellate courts, but, thanks partly to my reporting and the controversy that ensued, New York’s highest court overturned the rulings. Owens, who said he felt as if he’d been in Mississippi throughout the ordeal, went to Congress, served honorably, and retired in 2006. Beatty was convicted in federal court a few years later of corruption unrelated to his election scheme. In 1990, he was assassinated by a non-political rival. [It’s all in four stories linked here.](#)

The experience of trying for months to alert others to Beatty’s malfeasances taught me that even bona-fide scoops may not interest most news media if the news comes from the wrong side of the tracks and its larger implications aren’t clear. Only after the *Times*’ Sydney Schanberg read the *Voice* report and alerted the rest of the world in his op-ed page column did the *Times*, the courts, and the Democratic Party show any inclination to do what all of them supposedly had been established to do in the first place.

I learned that a truth-teller has to persist against conventional wisdom and indifference. Sometimes only an advocacy journalist inflamed by commitment to an insurgent cause will keep at it long enough. Even a highly professional journalist may lack motivation and adequate resources unless he or she makes a strenuous effort to summon them.

I learned, too, that even persistence may fail if the writer hasn’t enough historical memory and sound judgment to find the “story” in the deluge of impressions. People will resist facing even an incontrovertible piece of evidence if its implications are counterintuitive and therefore “make no sense”. That’s what happens when readers lack an interpretive story line that explains why the facts matter. For that, they have to trust the journalist to “break” sound new ideas as well as news itself. In the Beatty case, selling the story meant shattering white indulgence of black corruption by persuading readers of the need for reformers like Owens.

2. Blocking a dubious indictment of a future national leader.

The truth that there were serious flaws in the preparation of a pending indictment of New York Congressman (now Senator) Charles Schumer in 1982 fell into my lap wholly through a conflict of interest of my own that made it a hard story to report. Indeed, I wound up having to report it not as a journalist but as a lonely citizen, writing unpaid guest columns for a small Brooklyn weekly, *The Prospect Press*.

I couldn’t tell the story in the *Village Voice* because I’d stumbled upon fellow *Voice* writers' involvement in driving an indictment of Schumer, whom they disliked for not being "progressive" enough. It was they who'd urged his prosecution upon an ambitious and receptive young U.S. Attorney for Brooklyn, Edward Korman, who'd recently brought down Congressman Fred Richmond, as described in one of the *Voice* essays linked in "A Sleeper Sampler" and elsewhere on this site.

My *Voice* colleagues and the prosecutor were pursuing the case for moralistic and personal reasons with scant legal justification. I knew this only for a reason that undermined my own credibility, though: My girlfriend was working in Schumer's office and was giving me the other side of the story.

Not surprisingly, the only people inclined to believe my account were those who had reasons of their own to distrust the *Voice* muckrakers and/or the U.S. Attorney. To grasp the injustice of the case, one had to shed the righteousness of "white hat" muckrakers, and one had to know that the criminal justice system itself is highly susceptible to abuse if its skeleton of laws lacks a "cartilage" of extra-legal trust and integrity among prosecutors.

My columns in the small neighborhood weekly were handed around and played a role in alerting people in the Justice Department and the courts to the flaws in the indictment. It was dropped before being formally brought, but only after a lot of publicity and controversy.

Twenty five years later, in 2007, I had a reason to tell [the whole story of the Schumer case](#) again as Schumer, by then on the Senate Judiciary Committee, was investigating the Bush Administration's efforts to politicize U.S. Attorneys' prosecutions of Democrats.

Again, the "cartilage" of trust and professionalism had worn thin, but by 2007 I must have been the only reporter to recall that Schumer had been the victim of a politicized prosecutorial investigation. Ironically, back in 1982, the probe had been instigated not only by partisan Republicans but also by leftist muckrakers, and it was closed down by senior Reagan Justice Department officials after Schumer's attorney, Arthur Liman (later the Democratic counsel to the congressional Iran-Contra commission) went to Washington and confronted them with the bizarre truth about the inquiry.

3. Exposing a journalist's primary colors.

In 1996 I was nursing a strong hunch that Joe Klein, then a prominent *Newsweek* columnist and television pundit, was the anonymous author of the novel *Primary Colors*, his roman a clef about Bill Clinton and his circle.

I first claimed that Klein was "Anonymous" in William Powers' [Washington Post media column](#), and I kept insisting on it even after Klein's vehement denials had convinced the media that he wasn't the author. ("It wasn't me; I didn't do it," he told CBS News flatly, just as CBS was taping me insisting it was Klein. CBS didn't run that part of its footage.)

I wrote a column that opened, "May I remind Joe 'I didn't do it' Klein of O.J. Simpson's vow that he will 'leave no stone unturned' until he finds Nicole Brown Simpson's killer?.... If Klein didn't write *Primary Colors*, let him devote his far-more-considerable investigative skills to finding the author." No one would publish it. (I was freelancing at the time; this was well before blogging.)

Months later, a reporter discovered the novel's original paper manuscript with Klein's handwriting on it. What had made me so sure of his authorship? Again, memory and judgment played a part. Having read Klein's columns in *New York* magazine in the late 1980s, I remembered his characteristic locutions and obsessions about liberals and race – tropes that popped up in the novel.

When I saw an op-ed column in the *Baltimore Sun* by David Kusnet, a former speechwriter for Bill Clinton, voicing similar suspicions, I re-read the novel, and more of Joe Klein just leapt off the page. So I called Bill Powers, who described the "Kusnet/Sleeper theory" of authorship. Klein left me an exasperated voice-mail message: "Jim, I don't have a patent on the word 'Yikes'!"

Again, though, as in the Beatty case cited above, most journalists had accepted Klein's denials and weren't as open as Powers to a literary cross-examination. We were in a gray area, where I "knew" the truth thanks to memory, some literary acumen, and political judgment. When Klein, exposed by his manuscript, confessed his authorship at a press conference with Random House's Harry Evans, I was there in the crowd of reporters and, in a *Wall Street Journal* column soon afterward (linked above, with the Powers column) I offered my interpretation of why he'd lied so vigorously and what I think was at stake for journalism and politics in the lie.

4. Somewhere over the Rainbow

Most of my work involves not breaking news but trying to scope out societal learning curves, a little ahead of their time. The matter of how our interpretive frames rise and fall is as interesting as the facts we weave into those frames. As a *Daily News* columnist in the summer of 1993, I "knew," not from polls but from years of immersion in black and white-ethnic neighborhoods in the city's outer boroughs, that Rudolph Giuliani would defeat New York's first African-American mayor, David Dinkins, in that fall's election.

[The *Daily News* columns I wrote about the mayoral campaigns](#) became pretty insistent and combative, cutting against the conventional grain, as in the Schumer and Klein stories.

After Giuliani won, I enlarged my frame of reference and analysis by comparing New York's electoral upheavals with those in other cities. A cover story in [The New Republic](#) was the first time that my breaking a new interpretation rather than just news became national news in itself.

That set off a four-year-long train of columns, reviews, and appearances in which I challenged some liberal as well as conservative racial thinking. Some of that thinking was racist in an obsessive, sometimes piously dotting way that tends to reinforce racism itself; some of it was ideologically leftist and reductionist in assigning blacks revolutionary roles.

Almost all such bad thinking presumed that having a skin color automatically means having a "culture." In 1997 I wrote [Liberal Racism](#) against that assumption. The book prompted [interviews on NPR](#) and with [The Atlantic](#), and many debates, plunging me deeper into arguments and acrimony, sometimes on Charlie Rose and in NPR commentaries, sometimes in the columns, essays, and reviews filed on this site under "Race" with additional reflections on the subject.

One scoop in this vein required visiting the Rockefeller Foundation archives in Tarrytown, NY to look into the background of Prof. Leonard Jeffries of the City College of New York, whose diatribes about Jewish complicity in the slave trade had been fanning a spark of truth into a political conflagration. I read letters and memos written by Jeffries' early funders and enablers and wrote a not-wholly unsympathetic column in the [Race Doctors at City College](#), *Daily News*, in 1993, but [in The Nation](#) I admonished some on the left for indulging him.

5. Another side of September 11, 2001 – and of November, 1948.

Bringing memory and judgment to bear on news sometimes yields small discoveries that others persist in ignoring. Shortly after the ordeal of New York firefighters on 9/11, I noticed that their department emblem, the Maltese Cross, is a relic of medieval battles between the Knights of Malta, who were Christian Crusaders, and Muslim Saracens trying to block their way to the Holy Land. That seemed a haunting precedent given George W. Bush's brief characterization of the confrontation with Islamicist terrorists as a "crusade." But, perhaps because he hastily dropped the term and the implicit analogy, no one ever mentioned the fire-fighters' Maltese Cross. To read about it, scroll down to the third column on this link, from [The New York Observer](#).

Similarly, Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's fateful praise in 2002 of Strom Thurmond's racist, Dixiecrat presidential campaign of 1948 against Harry Truman unleashed a deluge of commentary about the implications of that campaign, which nearly cost Truman the election to Republican Thomas Dewey. But no 2002 news analysis or commentary about the 1948 election mentioned an important "fourth party," this one on the left, that had also endangered Truman by drawing away liberal Democrats just as Thurmond was drawing away conservatives.

When the History News Network published my account of [the Communist-backed presidential bid of Henry Wallace](#), who had been FDR's vice-president for a term, nothing happened. No news analyst or columnist who'd written about the 1948 campaign made a correction. The silence seemed a result of sheer dissonance, given the eagerness to nail the racists Thurmond and Lott, but also perhaps a touch of professional embarrassment at having missed the full story of Truman's near-defeat.

6. Forebodings about the New York Times

I found myself writing about journalism itself in a [Daily News column in 1994](#) that explained why the New York Times' then-editorial-page editor Howell Raines was bad for the paper and for journalism.

I said it again at length in 1997 in *Liberal Racism*, in a chapter called "Media Myopia." But only 10 years after the News column, when Raines was consumed by the scandalously false reporting of Jayson Blair on his watch as executive editor, were my intuitions confirmed. Raines is a talented man with gargantuan flaws, including a penitential Southern anti-racism that gets tangled up in its own moralism, as I'd argued in 1994.

By the time of his editorial demise in the Blair affair I was no longer at the News, but I did write an "I told you so" in the Hartford Courant (it follows the Daily News column in the link here) that was linked at sites such as Slate and reprinted, even in the Jerusalem Post, which had its neo-conish reasons for highlighting a crisis at a liberal newspaper.

7. The cheapest kind of flattery.

The Raines flap had an ironic twist that prompts a final observation: Interpretive scoops that break new ideas as well as facts are [very easily stolen](#). When 18 paragraphs of a Washington Post review I'd written of Marshall Frady's biography of Jesse Jackson wound up under someone else's byline a few weeks later in the San Francisco Chronicle, the reasons were instructive, if depressing.