

Journalists are taught to lie right in the school, if Columbia Journalism School is any guide

Lev Tsitrin

Is doctoring a record of a public talk a proper journalistic procedure?



Should an organization that “defend[s] the freedoms of speech and the press” be doing it?

Apparently, the answers are “yes” and “yes” – at least when the organization in question is Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, and the conversation is that between its Executive Director Jameel Jaffer interviewing Jelani Cobb, the Dean of Columbia Journalism School, and Isabella Ramírez, Editor-in-Chief and President, Columbia Spectator.

The conversation was part of a day-long sequence of panels united by the theme of [“The Future of Press Freedom: Democracy, Law, and the News in Changing Times.”](#) I attended because of two major lacunae in our press coverage that

greatly concern me: one is the government's repression of individual speech (the government all but blocks author-published books from the mainstream "marketplace of ideas" that are our nation's libraries and bookstores by denying them services reserved for corporate publishers only), the other being the way judging is done in the federal courts (when I sued to give those government services to authors, thus granting individuals the speech rights of corporations, I discovered that in federal courts one's argument doesn't count – federal judges feel free to replace parties' argument with the utterly bogus argument of judges' own concoction to decide cases the way they want rather than "according to law," and they defend this "procedure" when sued for fraud by a self-given (in *Pierson v Ray*) right to act from the bench "maliciously and corruptly." Tell that to Trump – won't he say that he is shielded by that right too, because branches of the government are co-equal?)

For reasons journalists do not divulge, the mainstream media adamantly refuses to cover those issues, so the presence of the First amendment scholars attracted me. May be, they know what is going on? So I registered, and went.

My plan was to talk up the attendants, and to see if they would be interested in looking into government's violation of individuals' free speech rights, and that of due process of the law. However, the organizers inserted a yet another interesting panel – a report right from the front-lines of reporting, so to speak. Columbia is an epicenter of protests against Israel's war on Hamas and therefore, the focal point of the nation's press. Who is better to talk about the drama of journalism and free speech now unfolding in sensational action on the lawns and in the buildings of Columbia – all complete with a thousand cops rushing in, than Jelani Cobb, the Dean of Columbia Journalism School, and Isabella Ramírez, Editor-in-Chief and President, Columbia Spectator?

It was all very interesting until Dean Cobb went into the soliloquy which I paste from the [posted transcript](#): "There are three things that I'll say that I think are really important. One is that the students were a lot more justified in their concerns than has been reported. When you walk through the very specific reasons why they felt the way that they did, it makes a lot of sense. And we had students out there, one of

whom had lost 14 family members in Gaza and another of whom had lost eight family members. And one of the leaders was a Palestinian young man who grew up in a refugee camp. And so, there was the kind of narrative of the impatience, all these bratty kids who are whatever. You lose 14 members of your family and what would be your response to it?"

This was asked as, obviously, a rhetorical question – to which I replied from my seat with a two-word practical suggestion: "*blame Hamas!*" "Blame Hamas, you say?" – Dean Cobb replied, as if gathering his thoughts – "I saw no antisemitism among protestors!"

One question of course is, what kind of reply is that? What does one have to do with the other? How do students protesting to Dean Cobb that they are not anti-Semites (and would they tell him the truth if they were? are Columbia students *that* stupid?) excuses them for not blaming Hamas for what befell Gaza?

The other question is, why did the Knight First Amendment Institute – the organization that claims, according to its home page, to "promote a system of free expression that is open and inclusive, that broadens and elevates public discourse" deemed it necessary to excise this 10-second exchange both from its written transcript, and its podcast <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/views-on-first-war-speech> – (scroll down to "Episode Six: The Crisis at Columbia" and listen at 23:54)?

Was it just because I intruded? But they did not cut the other form of public reaction – the applause. So something else must be going on.

What exactly? It reminded me of what happened long ago, back when I was a kid in the Soviet Union. My father brought from a bookstore a bio of Einstein translated from English "with minor abridgements," according to the title page. Here in the US, I ran across the original edition – and it turned out that all that the Soviet publisher "abridged" was mentions of Einstein's involvement in Jewish causes, and his support for Zionism. The cuts must have amounted to half-dozen sentences, perhaps a hundred words in all, but completely distorted Einstein's worldview – not by commission, but by omission. And, needless to say, they were an act of official antisemitism.

Whoever edited Dean Cobb's remarks, omitting his refusal to entertain a thought that maybe – just maybe – Columbia protesters should have blamed Hamas rather than Israel on the death and destruction in Gaza, also had a motive in surgically cutting out 10 seconds out the 25-min talk. Was that motive similar to the Soviet editors' in the case of the Einstein bio? And was it done at Dean Cobb's direction?

I do not know. But it is certain that the skill is there, in Columbia Journalism School (in fact, Dean Cobb boasted about it – “the NYPD has released a five-minute sizzle reel [of arrest of the students occupying Columbia Hamilton Hall] ... it wasn't a good video ... I have some students in the doc program at the journalism school that could really fix that for you [NYPD]”) The question is – why was this skill deployed to cut out my 2-word remark? Dean Cobb assured the audience that “the young people who I talk to vigorously denounced anti-Semitism.” So what was it?

Whatever the reason, the fact remains that journalists see no problem lying by omission, and are taught this right in the journalism school. I can now add to my collection of such journalistic lies, the lies about Americans' individual speech rights and the “due process” in the federal courts, the lies embedded in transcripts of talks by a no less than a promoter of “a system of free expression that is open and inclusive, that broadens and elevates public discourse” – the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, done I assume by Columbia Journalism School students, perhaps at direction of its Dean, as they cut their teeth on slyly injecting the lies of omission into their reporting.

Lev Tsitrin is the author of [“Why Do Judges Act as Lawyers?: A Guide to What's Wrong with American Law”](#)