

“The Education of a Columnist”

Ginia Bellafante
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I’m going to start talking a little bit about opinion writing because that’s what I do as a columnist and I think a lot of the students will be interested in this. Opinion writing feels now today like a currency that has really been devalued. You kind of feel like a Greek bond if you’re an opinion writer because everybody in the world is out there giving their opinions all the time on blogs, on email. I have an uncle who upon retirement decided he needed to send an email to everyone in the family chronicling his favorite movies. Every time he went to a movie, you’d get a long review.

Everybody’s a critic. That was in play when I first started out. In the 90s, everybody was a critic. Today, it really is true. You have to, as an opinion writer, as a critic, as a columnist, bring something else to the picture. What is that something else? That is the challenge for us. Those among us who are employed to do it aren’t doing it just as a hobby. What are you bringing to the table for readers? I think I aim to bring a sense of my opinion bolstered by a lot of data, a lot of information as a columnist and as a critic.

I would try to think hard about what a television series meant, what was its larger meaning to the world. I wanted to do more than thumbs up, thumbs down. I wanted to offer impressionistic visceral reactions, which is what a lot of criticism is today. I wanted to analyze things in the context of our society and talk about what things mean. I enjoy doing that very much as a television critic. I now have started to do the same kind of work as a big city columnist.

Writing about New York is an incredibly exciting thing. It’s a great gift to be able to do that. It’s challenging because it’s like saying write about the world write about anything and everything. Everything happens in New York. Everything is happening of all different kinds of magnitudes. It’s a challenge to figure out what to write about from week to week when there’s so much. There’s never scarcity. It’s how do I make a decision in the course of this week. What do people want to read about on Sunday? I’m deciding what I’m writing about on Monday. It has to be something I can report and deliver by Thursday night and it has to be something that can feel relevant on Sunday and that can be very tough. Sometimes you want to play off the news. Sometimes you want to just tell a good story. Sometimes you want to weigh in on something that is going to be in the air, something that’s ongoing.

The challenge of writing for a newspaper is always timeliness and that sense of added value. You want to bring the reader more context, more information, more data than they’re going to get on some blogs. I started my column with this notion that it was going

to be about anything and that was called The Big City and that's what they meant, the big city. That felt really scary. The only way it was going to work was if I focused on my interests. What interests me about New York? Everything. Even that was overwhelming. If you're interested about food, you could write an entire food column just about food in New York. You could write a fashion column. You could go in so many different ways and I tried to isolate points of interest of my own that would be fun for me and would have larger resonance.

I was very interested in real estate and housing. Well, what does real and estate signify in New York? It signifies the great disparity in incomes. I've lived in New York practically my whole life. I just noticed in doing a column a few weeks ago that there is an intersection on the Upper West Side, 62nd street and Amsterdam Avenue where there's a housing project. Not a big housing project. Certainly not a notorious housing project. A housing project 30 or 40 years old, it had a daycare center that was in jeopardy of losing city funding. There's many subsidized daycare programs in New York.

A few blocks to the east is this towering structure called 15 Central Park West, which a friend of mine refers to as the Goldman dorm because it's full of Goldman Sachs executives including this chairman Lloyd Blankfein. It is a building that was built to replicate the Park Avenue buildings that were built in the '20s, which many consider the absolute finest architecture in New York. Built to the highest standards, limestone, incredible insulation. The architect Robert Stern said I'm going to build that new today and he did that at 15 Central Park West and it is full of celebrities and incredibly rich people including the former chairman of CityGroups. He bought his apartment for \$42 million. Where in the world are there apartments for \$42 million? That's just inconceivable to people in most other cities in the world.

So here we have someone living in a \$42 million apartment and two blocks we have a housing project with subsidized daycare that may be lost and two blocks to the west of this building was another tower where Alex Rodriguez lives. So that to me completely represents everything that is so crazy and interesting and wrong and unjust. Everything in the mix in New York. So that was a way in to what I realized I was really interested in. Housing was interesting to me. Income disparity is really, really interesting to me. Consumer habit. All that stuff led back to the same issue.

I wrote my first column about this dichotomy and where it is represented in New York and another big intersection where it is so palpable is the corner of 96th street and Park Avenue. 96th and Park is the end officially of the Upper East Side and the beginning of east Harlem. You have the not even 1 percent top of the top living there and then you have all this disparity living to the north. That kind of stuff is palpable. I was thinking this is going to be my theme.

Serendipitously, I was fortunate that as I decided this was going to be my theme a few days later, Occupy Wall Street erupted in Zuccoti Park downtown. Then the entire world began to really focus its attention on this issue, which is so important in so many places and especially New York. I was struck early on. It felt to me as though this completely

hugely important issue was being trivialized by the mode of protest. The protesters in those first few days before it really took off were an assortment of young people. What really upset me and what struck me is that they really didn't know the issues they were really fighting against. You would say, "Argue for the Buffett Rule. Isn't this crazy that we tax income?" They had no idea what I was talking about.

There was one girl in the first early days walking around with a sign that said "Reinstitute the Glass Steagall Act", which had been repealed and separated commercial from investment banks and was thought to be responsible for a lot of the trouble we got into. She said she felt really disillusioned because no one knew what the Glass Steagall Act was. So I was out there four, five days and disillusioned and I wrote a column saying this is an important issue but it's being taken up as theater and we need better than this. I got an enormous amount of flack for this, still to this day. Seven or eight weeks later, I am getting a lot of flack for that position because most readers felt that I had trivialized the issue and in my mind the issue was paramount and the mode of protest was trivialized.

That was the first time in my career where I really felt as though I had struck a nerve about an issue people cared deeply about. I did feel that in retrospect I should have not taken such a flip attitude about the style the protesters adopted. There is a tradition of this street theatrics method of protest. Well, look at this movement and this movement. Most movements do have a specific agenda. The civil rights movement wanted to get rid of Jim Crow. I felt that this movement was still unfocused and it still really is unfocused but I did sort of think you know what before I take such a strong position, it's silly to run around in costumes to protest inequality.

You have to really realize there are really strong opinions on the other side and you're going to really tick people off. And I don't think it's worth ticking people off just for the sake of ticking people off. You tick them off if you really, really feel as if you have an opinion that is almost impervious to argument. You are on the side of the angels. Then you can do it. This was a very important lesson and one I'm grateful to have received early on because now I'm going to approach everything every time with more consideration. It may not obviously change how I feel about something but I'm going to take the other side and try to anticipate what other people may be thinking and feeling and how it's going to affect them.

Occupy Wall Street was something that really did take off. It has brought an incredibly important discussion to the table. The movement itself is still in focus now in New York and elsewhere it's been broken up by the crazy antics of the NYPD and the other police forces around the country. It's got people talking and that ultimately is what's important. We'll see what happens from here. I guess I would not have anticipated this; the act of bringing attention to something no matter how ridiculous it seems has its own value. So I've learned that so far. Even when an issue does not seem controversial, it is.

I had never written about city life before. I've never hovered city council meetings or small town politics or anything and so many people are so invested in the places where they live, which is so wonderful. Even when it is an issue that seems relatively

straightforward, you just get a lot of response. People care. One of the fun things about being a columnist in the Internet age is that I can disparage a lot of things about the internet and there are too many commentators out there and all that but you do have this wonderful dialogue with readers. They want to talk to you. You could not believe the length of letters. Sometimes I'll pick up the phone or get my email and there will be six, seven paragraphs long.

People are passionate and they want to engage you and they like to argue. They want me to come back to them with a response. They like the volley a lot. It's time consuming for me and I'd rather be grocery shopping on Sunday but it is a way to understand your audience that didn't exist before. I don't know how it worked in the Walter Winchell age but I doubt he ever responded to angry letters.

In some sense we have lost voices of critical authority. There is no one commentator that anybody looks for anymore at all the way there was in that era, in the Winchell era. The op-ed page now at the Times has lots and lots of opinionators as they call them. It's very diffused. Opinion writing is very diffused but what you gain is this relationship to the people who are reading you. They can help you and give you new insights and help you develop your way of thinking and help you focus it and keep you honest in a way that is terrific.

Even if you want to have that autocratic sensibility, you can't anymore. I think probably that is a good thing to the world. The challenge of a column, which is different from the challenge of critical writing, is you need to balance reporting and opinion. You need to give the reader a sense of what it feels like to live in a city at a certain time and place. An urban column, metro column or city column is different than an op-ed column. They share similarities. You have to take a stance, but you have to also give flavor.

Thank you.

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