



CULTURE | PULSE

MOVEMENT JOURNALISM IS THE ANTIDOTE

By Tina Vasquez

I've been a working journalist for more than 10 years, but it was only recently that I learned about movement journalism. For the first time in my life, I have the language to talk about my work. More importantly, learning about this framework has fundamentally changed how I view the field.

Movement journalism—as defined by the Southern journalism collective Press On—is journalism in service of liberation. It is “journalism that strives to meet the needs of communities that are directly affected by injustice, and that are taking action toward liberation for all people,” as Press On’s co-founder, Anna Simonton wrote. For me, it is also journalism that advances justice. Conceptualizing of journalism in this way disrupts so-called “journalistic objectivity,” the longstanding myth that media is impartial and nonpartisan; that media is “fair and balanced” and must present “both sides.” What this usually means is that we read more from and about those who wield State violence than we read about the communities experiencing state violence. We have a clear understanding of what this looks like in immigration reporting. When the Trump administration unleashes another attack on undocumented communities, reputable outlets are more apt to quote leaders of anti-immigrant groups than undocumented immigrants subject

to the latest round of inhumane and often unlawful immigration enforcement.

Identifying as a movement journalist is a surefire way to get dismissed by other journalists, legacy publications, powerful editors, and the field at large—and I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a part of me that wanted to become a respected name in the industry. What journalist doesn’t want to be esteemed by their peers or acknowledged for breaking important stories? Who among us doesn’t want to get big bylines? But identifying as a movement journalist may put these things at risk. At the very least, your work will be demeaned and dismissed as “activism” or “advocacy,” and your ability to actually operate as a journalist may be questioned. The assumption being that you’re too close to stories to tell them honestly, or that you are simply the mouthpiece for movements, mindlessly reporting and never questioning. These are false assumptions, of course, but the fear of these characterizations can be enough to scare journalists away from reporting the needs of particular communities in a way that unapologetically centers those most impacted. This is especially true for reporters of color and other marginalized journalists who may belong to the communities they’re reporting on, and whose journalistic integrity is already more scrutinized.



So why take the risk? Because what is more rewarding than journalism in service of liberation, journalism that has a real impact in communities? Journalism that is unflinching in its truth telling? What I've realized is that I have always aspired to do movement journalism; I just didn't know to call it that. I've spent my adult life developing long standing relationships in the communities I cover, and I have spent years building trust with people in movements focused on racial justice, immigrants' rights, and reproductive justice. I see my reporting as an extension of the trust I've built. People entrust me with sensitive stories and I have certain rules of engagement that confirms communities' trust in me. I approach my work collaboratively, centering the most impacted people, and doing whatever humanly possible to reduce harm. This is what movement journalism is to me.

But also consider this: Journalism has a deeply racist history, all while purporting to be "objective." Journalist Lewis Wallace, who literally wrote the book on the myth of objectivity in journalism, has been instrumental to my understanding of movement journalism, and it was Lewis who invited me into the movement journalism world. As co-founder of Press On, Lewis asked me to be a mentor in the organization's Freedomways Fellowship program for journalists of color rooted in the south. I figured if I was going to be a mentor to other movement journalists and if I was going to identify as a movement journalist, I better know what I'm talking about. I began to delve more deeply into journalism's origins and as I continue my reading and learning, a question keeps rattling around my brain: Shouldn't we want to subvert norms in industries with deeply troubling histories?

In the 2011 book *News For All The People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media*, journalists Juan González and Joseph Torres lay bare journalism's original sin:

...we read more from and about those who wield State violence than we read about the communities experiencing state violence.

"[N]ewspapers, radio, and television played a pivotal role in perpetuating racist views among the general population. They did so by routinely protracting non-white minorities as threats to white society and by reinforcing racial ignorance, group hatred, and discriminatory government policies. The news media thus assumed primary authorship of a deeply flawed national narrative: the creation myth of heroic European settlers battling an array of backward and violent non-white peoples to forge the world's greatest democratic republic. This first draft of America's racial history was not restricted to a particular geographical region or

time period—to the pre-Civil War South, for example, or the western frontier during the Indian Wars; nor was it merely the product of the virulent prejudice of a few influential media barons or opinion writers or of a specific chain of newspapers

or television stations. Rather, it has persisted as a constant theme of American news reporting from the days of Publick Occurrences, the first colonial newspaper, to the age of the Internet."

It wasn't that I didn't theoretically know this as a journalist of color working in the industry. I've written extensively about journalism's white gaze, the media's complicity in violence against vulnerable people, and journalism's "othering" of immigrant communities to the point of dehumanization. But it's astonishing to have the history of the industry laid out so plainly. It helped me realize that racism, extraction, and exploitation are not just building blocks of the industry; they are baked into the field. I see movement journalism as both the antidote and a threat to the status quo. And to be clear, it is a threat and it has always been seen as such.

I live in North Carolina, the state where the only coup d'état ever to take place on American soil occurred in 1898. The Wilmington Massacre started with a white mob burning down the African American-owned newspaper, *The Daily Record*, before overthrowing the local government comprised of newly-elected



African American political leaders.

This event marked the end of Reconstruction in North Carolina and it literally started with the targeting of what was likely the nation's only Black-owned newspaper.

After Reconstruction, white journalists didn't just report on lynchings—publishing uncritical accounts of racialized terror alongside photos of hanging Black bodies—they condoned and encouraged this terrorism. Without African American investigative journalist Ida B. Wells—someone movement journalists consider a foundational hero—we may have never known the full history of lynchings “and the all-too-frequent collaboration of the white Southern press.”

Like many industries, journalism needs a reckoning. Perhaps this is an inconvenient time, as the president of the United States routinely calls the media the enemy of the American people and lambasts all facts he doesn't like as “fake news.” Or perhaps this is the perfect time to shed ourselves of the myth of objectivity and begin truth-telling in service to communities that are fighting for liberation and in need of justice.

I consider it a privileged place to have stopped caring about what the industry thinks of me and my work. All that matters to me is that I do right by the people who entrust me with their stories, and that the work I do—and how I do it—aligns with my values. I am a movement journalist whose work is evidence-based, rigorously reported, and unapologetic. It took me a long time to get here. I think a lot about how many of us are the first in their families to do creative and intellectual work and are fighting to be seen as professional in fields dominated by white peers. I think about how many of us are suffocating under the rigid confines of industries that never envisioned us as being a part of them in the first place. The time for conforming to racist standards and faux objectivity and professionalism based on white supremacy is over. Now is a time for disruption.

Won't you join me?
