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Controversy, Coverage and Cancel Culture: The Daily Mississippian's Reporting of the 2018 Ed Meek Controversy, and Related Findings

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CONTROVERSY, COVERAGE AND CANCEL CULTURE: *THE DAILY MISSISSIPPIAN*'S REPORTING OF THE 2018 ED MEEK CONTROVERSY, AND RELATED FINDINGS

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved By

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who throughout my life have promoted the importance of education and believed in me every step of the way, even when I didn't believe in myself; also, Olivia, who has been a source of strength and comfort in the everyday stresses and inconveniences of college. Lastly, but foremost, God, who has always been there in the worst of it all and who continues to bless me. Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I want to thank Professor Mitchell for agreeing to be my thesis advisor and providing guidance throughout this process, as well as Dr. Liberman, Dr. Husni and Mr. Baidya for their thorough and educational interviews.

I also feel a need to thank The University of Mississippi – Ole Miss – for always making this place feel like home to me. I took a gamble on Ole Miss, I rolled the dice, and it paid off for me more than I ever could have imagined. I came here as a fresh 18-year-old from South Louisiana, which despite being just five hours away from home, felt like a wide cultural divide for me. Moving into my dorm freshman year was the first time I had ever spent more than a week away from home without any family, and it was the first time I'd ever been away from home in any extended way outside of Louisiana.

In my three years as an undergraduate, I have always felt like I mattered, and that perhaps is the most important thing about my experience here. People from home, namely my friends at LSU, tell me how they are treated like a number there. Your student ID number is associated with you at every turn. At Ole Miss, your name matters, you matter. When a professor asks for me to attach my student ID number in an email, I roll my eyes, because in the very few times it has happened, it has been so un-Ole Miss-like that it has given me pause. This school takes you in and makes you family, and you are never the same thereafter. I am Ole Miss, and Ole Miss is me. It is a conglomeration of everyone who has set foot in its hallowed halls as student, faculty, administrator, or anyone else who feels a deep connection to this place.

There is something inherently special about Oxford and Ole Miss that you don't feel in most other places – the Ole Miss name carries a level of respect and reverence. I will finish my undergraduate time here knowing that I have left a better person and Ole Miss will remain as a better university because of me.

The opportunities here are amazing, and even more amazingly, how they just open up for you if you're willing to put yourself out there. I was able to make a name for myself in working tirelessly academically, but also getting to host a radio show, anchor a news program, write and photograph for the newspaper and yearbook and essentially become a fixture at the Student Media Center, while also becoming personally acquainted with deans in the School of Journalism and the School of Law. These things and the others I have gotten to do aren't just resumé builders, they are life-changing experiences that will forever have molded me and prepared for life beyond Ole Miss.

For these things and for so much more that wouldn't allow me to stay on just one page, I am grateful.

ABSTRACT

MASON THOMAS SCIONEAUX: Controversy, Coverage and Cancel Culture: *The Daily Mississippian*'s reporting of the 2018 Ed Meek controversy, and related findings (Under the direction of Charles Mitchell)

As this thesis reflects a body of work completed by a journalism student near the conclusion of a journalism education at the University of Mississippi, I approached research and writing in that way. I interviewed three people, for an hour each, and the things I learned in those interviews greatly affected the conclusions I reached with this thesis. My full transcripts from those interviews are located in Appendices A-C. I also did a lot of scouring through articles of *The Daily Mississippian* from fall 2018 and otherwise; I looked at every single edition of the paper from that semester, both news reporting and editorials, to help establish my conclusions, which were as follows: 1) Because Meek was found to have not taken the photos he published, we cannot know whether or not he had racist intentions when he shared his post; 2) Regardless of the first conclusion, Meek's post was reprehensible for invading the privacy of these two women and for publicly shaming them for the way they were dressed, as well as attaching larger societal issues to them in the words of his post; 3) The actions in my second conclusion alone did not warrant the removal of his name from Farley Hall; 4) The university has an incredibly toxic relationship with its donors and potential donors, and people like Dean Norton, who stood out front and publicly decried Meek, shared the same sentiments with a donor in private; 5) Cutting ties with Ed Meek and losing his endowment money is a bigger cost than people are willing to admit, and it was not worth it; 6) Both of Meek's apologies were awful and their low quality contributed greatly to the controversy blowing up like it did; 7) *The Daily Mississippian* was biased in its coverage of Ed Meek, and it made no secret of it; 8) Publicly funded media does not have an obligation to favorably cover the institution that provides for it; 9) Objectivity as a traditional tenet of journalistic ethics is no longer practiced, but fairness and accuracy are the new standard; 10) This entire situation is grossly more complicated than I felt it was before I started this research.

Disclosure: From February 2019 to March 2020, I was a reporter and photographer for the DM. I did not report any story on Ed Meek, and the paper's editorial policies had no bearing on my departure. I left the paper on good terms.

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Chapter 1 How We Got Here: The School of Journalism

Gradually: How Things Happen at UM

The establishment of a journalism program at the University of Mississippi happened like everything else here, wrote former department chair Ronald Farrar, gradually. After some pushback by university administration who thought that the subject did not need to be taught formally, the Department of Journalism officially began in 1947, nearly 40 years after one of the leading journalism institutions in the nation, the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, opened in 1908. It was the first of its kind, a pioneer in the industry after Joseph Pulitzer had tried, and was rebuffed, in his attempts to begin the nation's first such school at Columbia. The idea caught on quickly, as by 1912, 32 journalism programs had begun nationwide. This did not create interest, though, at Ole Miss, where Farrar says the focus was "on liberal arts; that and on preserving traditions."

Many in the university felt that a journalism school was not necessary; they felt that an official training ground for fledgling journalists was not needed. *The Mississippian*, the school newspaper and the precursor to *The Daily Mississippian*, was enough (Farrar 13). Staffed mostly with English majors and treated mostly as a social club rather than a clinical on how to be a professional journalist, this left much to be desired for students with a devoted journalism curriculum in their minds.

In the wake of World War II, as returning veterans created a surge in enrollment, and with them, a demand for more courses and degree programs. J.D. Williams, now the namesake of the university library, remarked that the facilities of the time were similar to "that of an undernourished junior college," and he pledged to elevate Ole Miss's status from that of "a finishing school for the children of the gentry" to a respected and comprehensive university. Among Williams' ideas for changes was that of creating a small but quality department of journalism (Farrar 14).

At the time of its founding, a department of journalism was viewed as too "tradesman-like" to be placed under the esteem of the College of Liberal Arts, so it was initially created as a major in the School of Business (Farrar 16). Williams and Business School Dean Horace Brown began to interview chairman candidates, and they found Gerald Forbes, an unlikely fit, who had served as a history professor at Oklahoma State University, after a 10-year career at papers across that region, like the *Daily Oklahoman*, the *Dallas Times-Herald*, and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*.

When he found out about the opening at Ole Miss, Forbes jumped at the opportunity to start and run his own journalism program. Forbes was asked by Williams and Brown what his plans would be to grow the new department, and Forbes had no idea how to respond. So instead, he returned home to Oklahoma, and ended up writing "two or three pages of anything I could think of to make the department grow and mailed the list back to Oxford." His letter was met with a phone call, offering him the job. The upstart journalism department had its first leader.

To call it humble beginnings might be an understatement, especially for a campus outgrowing its own humble beginnings. When it officially chartered in February 1947, the Department of Journalism found its home in a tiny corner of the Lyceum, before being moved to

two classrooms and two offices in “Temporary A,” one of four surplus buildings that had been erected near Bishop Hall during the War (Farrar 17). There was no air conditioning, and while this situation was considered temporary, the department remained there for over a decade.

That did not stop some 79 students for signing up for journalism courses, solidifying the notion that there had been a palpable demand for a journalism program at the University of Mississippi.

As chair, Forbes was not just the leading but the only professor, and even so the department was offering ambitious courses like Management of the Weekly Newspaper, Principles of Advertising, Layout and Copy Writing, News Photography, History of Journalism, etc. Finally greenlit to hire additional faculty, Forbes gave the position to Samuel Talbert, a professor at Lehigh University who was working at a doctorate from the University of Iowa. The hire proved to be a major one for the fledgling school (Farrar 18).

The university’s newspaper, *The Mississippian*, as it was then known, had been around since 1911, and from its inception the university players agreed to keep it free from faculty or administrative control, and instead let it be entirely student-run and independent. With the beginning of the journalism department, there was some discussion about giving the department control over the paper.

However, Forbes and Chancellor Williams decided that this would not be the case, but rather, the department’s students would greatly contribute to the paper as a way to get practical experience in what Forbes was teaching them in their courses (Farrar 18).

Forbes took major action in his first year to get the school on a right path, including having his students write articles for their hometown newspapers, organizing a Press Club,

having editors and media practitioners from around the state and region give speeches and seminars to students, and establishing the Mississippi Scholastic Press Institute in order to have an outreach program for high school students (Farrar 19).

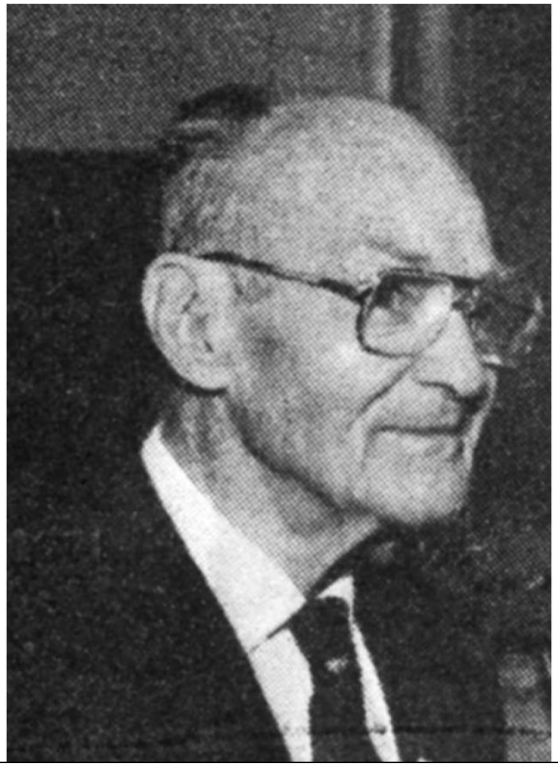
Forbes proved to be a success for the department, as enrollment rose by 10 percent the following fall, then by 20 percent the following spring. The attendance to his Scholastic Press Institute doubled. His Press Club was placing students into national organizations: Sigma Delta Chi and Theta Sigma Phi. He established a "reading room" with subscriptions to 20 state and regional papers and was given $400 to buy books. Forbes also made it his goal to attain accreditation as soon as possible (Farrar 20).

By late 1948, Samuel Talbert had completed his doctorate and was conferred the position of associate professor (Farrar 23). Talbert's Ph.D. in mass communications, still a new degree at that time, was considered a major asset in bolstering the academic stature of the young department, and it emboldened Forbes to seek national accreditation with the American Council on Education for Journalism (ACEJ). Only 40 programs in the nation had accreditation at the time, and the standards were high.

The ACEJ's audit rejected the department's application, citing its tiny budget as the reason. Forbes would not be there to see the program accredited, as he abruptly resigned his position nine years after beginning it, on July 16, 1956. Leaving much speculation in the way of his departure, students and fellow faculty wondered for years what had driven Forbes away; he later confirmed to then-chair and recently retired School of Journalism Dean Will Norton in 1986 that burnout had driven him away, after years of dealing with inadequate funding, as well as a taxing teaching and administrative load (Farrar 25).

Ole Miss Journalism Survives

In 1956, Forbes was nearly not the only loss for the university; with Forbes departure, Talbert too considered leaving, especially realizing he was now left to run a department he was not equipped to handle. He also found himself to be in a poor position to hire a replacement, with only $4,500 to offer as salary (equal to about $44,000 today). Talbert was offered a "dream job" from the University of Minnesota, one he seriously considered taking. This would have left the department with no faculty or administration, and effectively ended it less than a decade after it began. But Talbert made the fateful decision to reject the offer and remain at Ole Miss, and he hired Jere Hoar, an Ole Miss graduate who too had earned his Ph.D. at Iowa. With two Ph.Ds. in mass communications from Iowa in Talbert and Hoar, the Department of Journalism was able to stay the course, even in Forbes' absence (Farrar 25).



Gerald Forbes, founder and chair of the Department of Journalism, 1947-56. Photo courtesy of Ronald Farrar.

When he took over as chair in 1956, Talbert had already earned prestige as only the second person ever awarded a doctorate of mass communications, as well as his bachelor's and master's, from the University of Florida, and a career in newspapers during his youth. During his time at Florida, Talbert both literally and by virtue of his degree became a master of advertising, and he took these skills with him to teach students in an industry relied on advertising as its main source of revenue. (Farrar 28).

Talbert's prolificacy during his time as chair greatly aided the department's standing, as he wrote 104 articles for various journals and publications, and self-published two books: *Case Studies in Local Advertising* and *Reaching Alumni* – all by 1964. On the creative side, Talbert also wrote three plays and a novel, in addition to a weekly advice column that was carried by about 250 newspapers. A booklet he wrote on advertising, *How to Sell Mousetraps*, sold over 200,000 copies and was even translated into Spanish and Portuguese (Farrar 29).

Over the 23 years Talbert was with the department, it grew exponentially and in many directions. It added faculty including Gale Denley, Walter Hurt, Lee White and Neil Woodruff. Denley was hired in large part because of his ongoing experience as an editor, a role in which he continued serving during his time on faculty. The school solidified its standing as a fixture of campus when in 1960, it finally moved out of the old barracks near Bishop Hall to Brady Hall, where the Thad Cochran Research Center now stands. The building had originally been built as a hospital for the University Medical School before it moved to Jackson, and later housed the music department. But after 1960, it was abuzz with young journalists, and its front porch became the thing of campus legend (Farrar 30).

Brady Hall would become journalism Ground Zero on September 30, 1962, when the so-called "Last Battle of the Civil War" raged just hundreds of feet from the building in the fight for

James Meredith's admittance into the University of Mississippi. The building was a center of composure amidst the craziness, and with Talbert's guidance, *The Mississippian* published a special edition that earned student editor Sidna Brower a Pulitzer Prize nomination (Farrar 31).

Of those young reporters covering the Meredith fallout was graduate student Ed Meek, who made waves the year prior when in 1961, he completed a now-iconic photo essay of Oxford native and Nobel Laureate William Faulkner for the student-produced *Mississippi Magazine*. The photos were some of the last ever made of Faulkner (Farrar 32).

In the wake of the '62 riots, the Ole Miss journalism department had not yet achieved accreditation despite Talbert's further efforts to do so "to help build in Mississippi a sounder newspaper industry and a finer journalistic leadership through instruction, research and service" (Farrar 34). Talbert, though, would not see accreditation in his time as chair. After suffering from several heart attacks, beginning with the first in 1960, he regularly overcame health setbacks to remain in his position, before his death in 1972 at just 54 years old. His loss was felt heavily on the Ole Miss campus. The Mississippi Scholastic Press Association awarded him posthumously the Gold Em Award. The state Senate passed a resolution commending his life and works, as did the university faculty. In 1974, the Mississippi Press Association set up a research fund in his honor to finance graduate research by journalism students. The Department of Journalism then established an award in his name to be given to the student whose work contributed most to community service through journalism. In 1986, when the MPA created a journalism hall of fame, Talbert was an inaugural honoree. In 2008, the Silver Em award was renamed to honor Talbert, and in that same year, a room in Farley Hall was renamed in his honor, with a plaque that is still present in the building (Farrar 42-43). In the fall of 2019, the School of Journalism and New Media launched the Talbert Fellow program to provide exclusive

opportunities that include scholarship and financial assistance, as well as special events, trips and coaching from faculty.

Farrar Goes the Distance

Following Talbert's death, Ronald Farrar, who in 2014 wrote *Powerhouse: The Meek School at Ole Miss,* a book that essentially chronicles the history of the School of Journalism and New Media at the University of Mississippi, took over as chair. Although he would only serve in the role for four years, those years would contain one of the most pivotal moments in the then-department's history.

In 1975, Farrar approached Chancellor Porter Fortune about again putting the department up for accreditation – a risky and expensive process. And after nearly 30 years as an unaccredited department that nonetheless had become a respected unit of the university, failing now at accreditation would be a major setback to the program. A trio of administrators from the University of Southern California, Northwestern University, and the University of Florida arrived in Oxford for the on-site portion of the accreditation process. They were not well pleased with the worsening condition of Brady Hall, nor of the size of Farrar's office. They grilled faculty and students, and questioned the size of the department's budget. After a three-day evaluation, the team listed as the department's weaknesses its budget, heavy teaching loads, poor facilities and lacking equipment. But they did conclude that the journalism department should receive full national accreditation (Farrar 69).

The department was noted for its strong faculty, and among these professors was Ed Meek, by now out of Ole Miss as a student just over a decade and back as the university's public

information department and teaching students part-time as a public relations professor (Farrar 70).

Twenty-eight years after its founding, the journalism department had been accredited by the ACEJ. As part of their approval, they requested that the department be moved into the College of Liberal Arts, and with accreditation and a heightened respect, the department was welcomed into the College this time (Farrar 71).

By 1977, the department was able to finally leave Brady Hall for what was then known as the old Law School building, now known as Farley Hall, after Lamar Hall was completed to house the Law School. Farrar was called one day by Dwight Teeter, a friend and at-the-the time, director of the School of Journalism at the University of Kentucky. He was on his way out for a position at Texas-Austin, and said Kentucky had been searching for a replacement for some time. Farrar had not been searching for a new job or considering leaving, but he visited Kentucky, and after they offered to double his small salary he said he left Ole Miss with tears in his eyes. At the time of his retirement from the University of South Carolina, Farrar was honored on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. He enjoyed a long and successful career as an academic and a prolific career as an author, publishing a number of books on the field of journalism, as well as articles and studies (Farrar 72-73).

Norton Hears a Who

Will Norton took over as chair in 1977, with a faculty of four and still only about 170 students with a major in journalism. The slated move to Farley Hall would not happen for two years. But by the time Norton left Ole Miss in 1990, he doubled the full-time faculty to eight, the department had many adjunct professors and the number of majors doubled to over 350.

What began as an interim, placeholder position while the department searched nationwide ended with Norton being offered the permanent position after none of the candidates impressed and Norton had shown himself to be quite capable in his short time on the job. He was even chosen over more senior faculty, like Jere Hoar and Gale Denley (Farrar 79).

Early in Norton's tenure, the department did not control broadcast education at the university. Broadcasting courses had long been part of the Department of Speech and Theatre. There was student demand for a more formal program, but there was out-of-date equipment and little money to change that. Norton knew that in its current state, the broadcasting program would not be accredited. Speech and Theatre was outgrowing broadcast, and showed little desire to keep it. With Norton's approval, its jurisdiction was transferred to the journalism department, where he could overhaul the faculty and get the necessary equipment. By 1982, in just a few years' time, Norton had elevated the program to the level where it would be fully accredited. Ole Miss was now producing quality graduates in radio and TV (Farrar 81).

During his time as chair, Norton was able to add some quality faculty, like Jack Bass, who served as a reporter for 13 years in South Carolina and authored eight books that centered around people integral to southern history. Joining him was Willie Morris, editor-in-chief at *Harper's Magazine* and a celebrated author who had appeared eight times on the *Today Show* due to his influence at the magazine (Farrar 82).

The mid-1980s proved to be a tough time for journalism at Ole Miss, though, when the Board of Trustees of the Institutions of Higher Learning decided that in an effort to reduce redundancy, the three major universities in the state – UM, Mississippi State, and Southern Miss, would take on "leadership" roles in various degree programs. Despite the strong reputation of the liberal arts at Ole Miss, and the journalism department's standing as the only accredited

program in the state, USM was set as the "leader" in communications in Mississippi. This sparked outrage from faculty and influential alumni, and the IHL ultimately reversed a decision that would have crippled Ole Miss journalism, financially and otherwise. Funding, nevertheless, remained an issue, and by 1990, as he was receiving interest for positions at other institutions, and feeling as though he had run up against a wall at Ole Miss, Norton departed in 1990 to accept the deanship at the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at Nebraska.

Continuing Momentum

The 1990s were a time of change and growth for the department, beginning in 1991 with the hiring of Don Sneed as chair. He had been named an outstanding journalism professor at San Diego State University and had 10 years of newspaper experience. But what had impressed administration the most was that Sneed had just seen San Diego State through the re-accreditation process, something the journalism department at Ole Miss would soon face. It believed that, in addition to helping improve its output of scholarly research, Sneed would ensure the department would avoid any accreditation disasters (Farrar 92).

Sneed himself, and other faculty, released scholarly articles and books in his first year as chair, and Ed Meek, serving as an associate professor, secured a $4.5 million grant from the Mississippi Department of Human Services for a program that would teach literacy to people considered unemployable. Also in this time, Samir Husni, who had been hired in the 1980s as an instructor, was becoming more prominent as a magazine consultant, appearing in national publications as a writer and in interviews. Professor Joe Atkins was also gaining attention as an op-ed columnist in regional publications (Farrar 94).

Sneed garnered national attention from the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* for development of a "video report card." At the end of the semester, he would prepare a 20-25-minute video for each student, pointing out both their strengths and weaknesses. Simultaneously, Sneed was becoming impatient with the Graduate School, which he noted as being inflexible in its admission policies and degree standards. He saw the department through the re-accreditation in spring 1993, and by then, Meek had secured a total of $7 million for his "Project Leap: Learn, Earn and Prosper," statewide satellite network campaign to combat illiteracy (the program was based at Ole Miss), while Husni was featured in a profile by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Quarrels with administrators and ongoing issues with the Graduate School prompted Sneed's 1994 resignation. He left the university joyfully for a position at Florida International University.

Ole Miss responded to his resignation by leaving the department in the trusted hands of Husni for two years as interim chair, while the university conducted a slow nationwide search. In 1997, the university found its man, one Stuart Bullion of the University of Maine, where he had served as chair. Bullion had deep connections with Oxford and Ole Miss, as his mother was an Oxford native who rose to become the first female president of the student body. His grandfather was a clerk of the Lafayette County Chancery Court, and his cousin had been editor of *The Daily Mississippian* in the '70s. Too, Bullion had lived in Oxford as a child, before earning his bachelor's degree at Princeton. He called his hiring as chair at Ole Miss a "dream come true." Upon his hiring, many in the university were hoping for his immediate efforts to turn the department in to a School of Journalism, or at least, a "Center for Mass Communications Leadership." Bullion wrote to Ed Meek expressing his hesitancy at elevating the department's status yet. "The existing unit lacks the physical size to becoming a self-sustaining school," he

said. "More critical…is the need to first establish a valid national reputation for excellence in journalism…I can tell you that Ole Miss does not yet have that reputation 'out there'…I believe the department has a ways to go in overall quality of teaching, research and service – as well as physical size – to be able to aspire to the status of 'school or center'" (Farrar 99).

Bullion did, however, meet these needs with immediate action. He used endowed money to create a chaired professorship, and filled it with an editor from *The Clarion-Ledger* first, then with the editor of the state's largest newspaper, John Johnson, a Pulitzer Prize recipient. He then oversaw the renovation of Farley Hall and revised the program's curriculum to meet industry standards. Then, he set about to increase the diversity of the program's faculty. Ed Welch has been the first minority professor in 1979, but he left to pursue a Ph.D. The second was Flora McGhee, and Bullion was intent to add a third, which came by way of Burnis Morris. He also oversaw another re-accreditation in 1998. He did struggle, however, with fundraising, but got some relief when alumnus Charles Overby and the nonprofit he ran, Freedom Forum, awarded a $5 million grant to build what would become the Overby Center. Then, Overby got then-Chancellor Robert Khayat to secure $500,000 from the State Legislature for Farley Hall's facelift (Farrar 100).

The late 1990s would not come without some struggles for the journalism department, which went through an identity crisis. Despite Bullion's feelings about refraining from attempting to elevate the department to a "center" or "school," the university was feeling the pressure, as USM was now also awarding doctoral degrees in journalism, and Jackson State, Mississippi University for Women, and Delta State all featured undergraduate journalism programs, or at least courses. So, in 1997, Bullion proposed a Journalism Center. He knew that his faculty was too small to staff a full center, so he planned to pull from other departments

across the university to give such a center a multidisciplinary focus. He also intended to name the center for Charles Overby.

His proposal came at a very inopportune time, though, as a war was being waged over the fate of the Student Media Center. University administration used the renovation of Farley as an opportunity to move the SMC from Farley to Bishop Hall, quite literally across campus from Farley. Despite the strong feelings and protest of Bullion and faculty, the move was made, and for the first time since the department's establishment in 1947, some 50 years prior, *The Daily Mississippian* and the journalism department were not housed under the same roof. Nevertheless, by 2003, Bullion believed the program had improved enough to warrant a School of Journalism. He drafted a proposal that would have made the School a component of the College of Liberal Arts still, but even so increase its stature from a mere department. As seemed to always be the case in the department's history, the proposal did not overcome funding problems and administrative pressures within the university. And in 2004, Bullion was diagnosed with liver cancer, forcing him out as chair, with Husni again succeeding him as interim. On April 21 of that year, Bullion died at just 56, and his loss was felt heavily on campus, with his memorial service at Paris-Yates chapel on campus witnessing an overflow crowd (Farrar 103-106).

Samir Husni's journey to Ole Miss was the unlikeliest of routes. Born in Tripoli, Lebanon, he had a life-changing moment at eight years old: he received his first comic book, an Arabic-translated issue of *Superman*. While his young friends were interested in the character, he fell in love with the layout of the book itself, its combination of text and graphics with paper and ink (Farrar 107). Over the following years of his life, this would become an obsession, first with comics, and then with magazines. He earned a bachelor's degree at the University of

Lebanon, before being admitted to what is now the University of North Texas for graduate school. Travel difficulties as an immigrant delayed his arrival until after classes had begun, and he recalled not being welcomed with the most open arms. He exceeded expectations and ultimately wrote a well-received thesis, comparing the coverage of the Lebanese War by *The Times of London* and *The New York Times*. This got him admitted into the revered School of Journalism at the University of Missouri's doctoral program (Farrar 108).

He decided to focus his doctoral studies on the ever-changing state of the magazine industry in the U.S., crafting his dissertation with the title *Success and Failure of New Consumer Magazines in the United States, 1979-1983.* He earned his Ph.D. in 1983 with the intention to begin teaching and conduct research. Fortunately for him, at that time, the journalism department at Ole Miss had launched a program in magazine journalism, inspired by alumnus Jim Autry, a higher-up at Meredith Corp., the publisher of *Better Homes & Gardens*. Will Norton was looking for someone to head this new program on magazines, but without avail; that is, until a director at the Meredith Corp. told him about a doctoral candidate at Mizzou "who knows more about American magazines than anybody we've ever seen" (Farrar 109-110). Thus, Husni was hired, and Ole Miss had its magazine man. Husni first came to national attention in 1986 with his first edition of *Samir Husni's Guide to New Magazines*, an annual consumer-centered guide to the noteworthy magazines that had launched in the previous year. It continued to grow, and by 2009, it covered 704 new magazines. This kind of research activity made Husni a highly sought-after consultant, taking him all over the world and making him one of the most credible voices in the industry. Husni would even become the "Superman," of sorts, of the magazine world. After a student struggled to say his surname and resorted to calling him "Mr.

Magazine," Husni so enjoyed the name that he trademarked it and took it on as an official title (Farrar 111).

Husni had numerous opportunities to leave for what would be perceived as "bigger and better" opportunities than Ole Miss, but he remained in Oxford, spurning offers from the likes of Northwestern and Kansas. Twice before, Husni had served as interim chair of the journalism department, and he was in that position for a third time. Having been with the university for 20 years, and with a high profile, the university ended its national search for a new chair in 2005 by simply removing the "interim tag" from Husni's job title. Husni was described by the *Chicago Tribune* as "the planet's leading expert on new magazines," and CBS called him "a world-renowned print expert on print journalism." In his time as chair, Husni was featured in perhaps his biggest showcase, a segment in the popular *CBS Sunday Morning* show in which he was interviewed on the decline of newspapers (Farrar 112-113).

In his four years as permanent chair, Husni accomplished a great deal. Most importantly, however, was that he saw through the goal that so many, and most recently Stuart Bullion, had hoped to achieve. That was the elevation of the department to a school. In 2009, what was then-known as the Ed and Becky Meek School of Journalism and New Media began, and it was an independent school, free of the dominion of the College of Liberal Arts (Farrar 114).

In 2009, after 19 years at Nebraska, Will Norton was one of the longest serving administrators there. Robert Khayat was finishing up his 14-year tenure as Chancellor of the university, which had begun in 1995. During his leadership, the university's enrollment increased by almost half, endowment grew by more than 300 percent to nearly $500 million and the operating budget (long one of the major problems of the university and journalism department) grew from under $500 million to almost $1.5 billion (including a payroll increase of

300 percent). Also, Khayat had become a friend of the journalism program. Khayat would finally see through Bullion's other dream, a Journalism Center, in 2008. Adhering to the original plan, Charles Overby was given the namesake, and the $5 million addition to Farley began. It would feature 16,000 square feet of conference space, a state-of-the-art, 215-seat auditorium and spaces derived from the Newseum in Washington that constantly aired cable television news, showed historical southern journalism newspaper clippings and featured an exhibit of journalism's biggest moments (Farrar 161-163).

Finally a School

The move to create the School of Journalism, with Ed Meek's financial support, was transactional. Ed Meek needed more employees with graphic design skills for his printing company. He could not find qualified employees, and he was frustrated at the lack of understanding of the potential of social media. He shared these concerns with Chancellor Khayat. Meek then offered Khayat $1 million to hire teachers of the new technologies for which he sought employees. Khayat countered with an asking amount of $6 million for Meek to "have a school." Meek offered $5.3 million, and Khayat agreed to support the creation of the School of Journalism, with Ed Meek and his wife as the namesakes. The Meeks also rewrote their wills, so that upon their deaths, they would endow the school many millions more. Thus, in 2009, in his final year as chancellor, the Meek School of Journalism and New Media, as it came to popularly be known, was founded. The "New Media," came with Meek's desire for the school to create graduates with adequate knowledge and tools to master the then-new powers of the internet, and to counter the flailing state of the journalism industry (Farrar 164-165).

Now a school, it needed a dean. Husni was considered for the position, as it was seen as an easy transition from chair to deanship. But this was found to be objectionable, because

administration feared that making him dean would remove him from the classroom, where it felt that Husni could be more impactful as a professor and leader of the school's magazine ventures. Administration reached out to Norton, who by now had seen Nebraska's College of Journalism and Mass Communications through the construction of a new building and its selection as a Carnegie-Knight school. But at retirement age, and after much courtship from Ole Miss, he decided to move back to Oxford, with now adequate funding and the designation of "school" that he had so long desired. Upon taking over, there was but one concern: time. Privately, Norton had expressed his disappointment in his age, knowing that his time at the new school would not be the 19 years he had spent as a Cornhusker. But his energy level was high for the task of piloting a new school through a fragile beginning (Farrar 165).

Norton oversaw a lucrative period in those early years, with students placing in the Hearst College Journalism Awards and Society of Professional Journalists Awards, in addition to the Southeastern Conference Journalism competitions. Also, the school secured permission to confer its second bachelor degree, in Integrated Marketing Communications, making it one of the handful of institutions in the world that offered the major (Farrar 166).

Noted faculty were added to the school, including lawyer and newspaperman Charlie Mitchell, who took over an assistant deanship after many years with *The Vicksburg Post* and a presidency of the Mississippi Press Association. Patricia Thompson, a former writer with the *Washington Post* and editor at *The San Jose Mercury News*, and then a professor at Northwestern, was brought on too, and is now the assistant dean for student media. Mitchell, too, remains as a professor of communications law (Farrar 167). Curtis Wilkie, a native of the MS Delta region and famed reporter of *The Boston Globe*, was hired as a faculty member and then promoted as the first Overby Fellow in the Overby Center (Farrar 168).

In 2011, the Meek School held its first-ever independent graduation ceremony, as the other colleges and schools in the university do, separate from the campus-wide commencement. Serving as speaker was Dan Rather, the legendary journalist and former anchor of the CBS Evening News. Rather's presence only solidified that the school had "made it," that it was a respected institution and one that could continue pumping out resoundingly-qualified journalism graduates. A formal Strategic Plan was in place to continue the progress, and many felt its best days were always ahead. And many saw Meek's name attached to the School a sure positive; that is, until September 19, 2018…

Chapter 2 Meek: the Man

Rags to Riches

Ed Meek had perhaps the finest reputation of anybody associated with the University of Mississippi. For a man who would later count his endowment to Ole Miss in millions, his life started out in pennies. Growing up in Charleston, the eastern county seat of Tallahatchie County, he spent many nights sleeping *under* his family's house to get away from his parents. His father was an electrician and plumber with a bit of an alcohol problem, while his mom was a holy roller with the Baptist Church. He learned early that with his big hopes for himself, he would have to create all that he wanted out of next to nothing.

Edwin Meek, Ole Miss benefactor and founding donor/namesake of the School of Journalism and New Media at the University of Mississippi from 2009-2018. Photo courtesy of Bruce Newman.

Meek's first eye-opening experience in the field of journalism came with an after-school job with the *Mississippi Sun,* a weekly paper that served Tallahatchie County. He was hired as a printer's apprentice and did jobs like setting type and running errands, earning $7.35 per week. Then, as a high schooler, Meek was selected editor of the school newspaper at East Tallahatchie High. His business savvy began to develop as a sixth grader, when he began to mow lawns and saved up enough money using a push mower that allowed him to buy a gas-power mower and therefore to cut more lawns in the same amount of time and earn more money (Farrar 148).

Up until the last semester of high school, Meek had not really considered going to college, until in his senior English course, his teacher, who graded on a contract system, elicited an A out of Meek. While he had originally opted to shoot for a C grade, his competitiveness got the best of him, and as he watched his fellow students work towards an A, a grade which required the writing of a term paper, he too set forth on completing a paper and earning an A. The teacher was impressed by his work effort and recommended college. Meek disagreed, as he had been a middle-of-the-road student in his time as a high schooler, and he did not have enough money (Farrar 148).

He discussed the prospect of college with his mother, who encouraged him to do it, but this came with the understanding that he would have to pay for it. Meek did not quit the possibility discouraged; he found the money, revealing early in him an opportunism that would come to be a defining characteristic. He contacted his U.S. Congressman, Jamie Whitten, about a summer job that he had found about, which placed young men from Mississippi with the Forest Service as firefighters. It was a summer job with very good pay, especially for that time. There was one problem: the job had an age requirement of 18, and the new high school graduate was but 17. He was advised by another politician to simply omit mentioning his age, and so for the

summer off to Montana he went to battle forest fires. He returned to Mississippi with $7,200 in his bank account (Farrar 149).

Down to Mississippi State Meek went, as his brother and a mentor were there. On his first day in Starkville, he found himself talking to a football player, who asked him what his planned major was. When Meek replied with journalism, the athlete jokingly told him he better get himself to Ole Miss. So, he called his mother, who in turn called their state representative, and soon Meek was on a bus to Oxford. When the bus pulled into the Oxford station, Meek was met by two Ole Miss officials: Jim Webb, Personnel Director, and Samuel Talbert, chair of the Department of Journalism. Talbert immediately took a liking to Meek and offered him a student job in the department, and for Meek, who expressed immediate interest in photography, free and unlimited access to the darkroom (Farrar 149).

What happened next was a disaster. In his first semester, Meek took six courses; he failed four of them. Not much longer after he had arrived in Oxford, he was almost sent back home. His only two passing grades were a C in a journalism class and another in ROTC. His second semester was not much of an improvement, and the university registrar threatened to kick him out of school, unless he could maintain a B average in the 12 hours of summer classes he would have to take to get back on track. He and Becky married that summer, on June 24, and the Meeks spent their wedding night in the student family housing, the Ole Miss Village, with Ed studying for his exam at 8 a.m. the following morning. But he did manage to stay at Ole Miss, and he credited that to her (Farrar 149).

Now with a year of college complete and a married man, Meek had even less fortune than his family had in his childhood. Paying his way through school, he managed to scrounge together money for a ’49 Plymouth, whereas before he was forced to hitchhike home for school

breaks. Ed and Becky shared their resourcefulness, and as their money continued to run low, she paid $900 for a cosmetology course and the couple leased a shop for her. It was an immediate success, and she had four other employees, while Ed, with his journalism aspirations, did the meager "marketing" for the business. One might argue that Meek was a progressive husband of his time, and as he completed his own education and was able to begin supporting the couple, he encouraged her to give up the shop and achieve her own educational goals. After giving birth to their two children, she would ultimately attain her master's degree in Special Education, and worked for 34 years as a specialist in a state mental health agency in Oxford (Farrar 150).

While a student, the department of journalism offered both a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Science degree in journalism; the former required a foreign language, while the latter featured a number of courses in the School of Business. Ed was terrified that he could not pass a foreign language course, so he decided to pursue the B.S.J. With a business acumen, he found that he fit right in (Farrar 151).

After becoming a celebrated student and a favorite of Talbert and Jere Hoar, Meek saw through one of Talbert's goals of establishing a chapter of the professional journalism society, Sigma Delta Chi, on the Ole Miss campus (now known as the Society of Professional Journalists). He supported himself through college partially by his freelance work, including both his writing and photography. He and a fellow student, Larry Speakes (who would later become Acting White House Press Secretary under Ronald Reagan), started a successful student business that involved them working as "stringers," which is a freelance writer who submits work to various publications and is paid by the length of each piece. The two would provide news of Oxford and Ole Miss to interested area publications, and were so successful at it that they were given an office in the Lyceum (Farrar 151).

It was during this time that Meek came to be known as "Ed," the short form of his birth name, Edwin. For one of his stories, for which he used his nickname, "Budgie," as an alias to hide the fact that he was actually recycling stories from one publication to the next, an angry editor called asking who the hell Budgie Meeks was. The next day, he saw the byline under the name of Ed Meek, although to many on campus, including chancellors J.D. Williams and Porter Fortune, he would always be Budgie (Farrar 152).

Meek graduated with his bachelor's degree in 1961, but he stuck around to continue working at the university in the public relations office, at a time when public relations were about to tank, with national perception of the university hitting rock-bottom in the wake of the integration crisis. When James Meredith applied to Ole Miss, and was rejected, as had been the case for all the previous African American applicants, Meredith responded like none of the previous Black applicants. He refused to back down, and insisted as an Air Force veteran and as someone duly qualified for admission, that he would be a student at Ole Miss. With the intervention of President Kennedy and his use of force from the National Guard and the Department of Justice, riots ensued, but ultimately, Meredith won.

Meek and Speakes were there to cover it all, and at a time when the University of Mississippi was journalism Ground Zero, the two were in its trenches. A teletype machine was placed in the Lyceum so that they could immediately get any news out of Oxford, and the *Associated Press* installed, for the first time on a college campus, an *AP* photo transmitter that would allow Meek the photographer to have the same immediacy with his photographs (Farrar 152).

Soon after, Meek shot one of the most famous photographs of the whole saga, that of Meredith sitting alone at a desk, dressed in a suit and tie, in a classroom on his first day as a

student. The other students enrolled in the class left in protest, and as guards were preventing any non-students from entering the building, Meek, pursing a master's degree, truthfully told them that he was a student. With a camera hidden in his trench coat, he was allowed in, and he took the now-famous photos (Farrar 152-153).

In 1963, Meek and Meredith would actually be fellow graduates. Meek had earned his master's degree, and Meredith had endured a long year of harassment and isolation to graduate with his bachelor's in political science. Meek was intent on reporting on Meredith's graduation, so much so that he opted to not participate in his own graduation ceremony in order to photograph Meredith, who would have likely been sitting next to him (due to their alphabetically-neighboring names) for the commencement (Farrar 153).

Growing Media Prowess

After this, his second graduation from Ole Miss, he was offered an even-then-meager salary of $7,200 to continue his work in the PR office, which was actually less than he and Speakes made from their freelance work. However, soon after he began to work full time for the university, Chancellor Williams approached him with a monumental task; he would become, at age 24, the director of the PR office, but with the understanding that he had to do all he could to rebuild the Ole Miss reputation, which had been depleted by the Meredith episode. Meek responded to the challenge by developing personal relationships with journalists and power brokers at media outlets across the Southeast. This helped to generate some much-needed favorable news coverage of the university (Farrar 153).

After 10 years working public relations at Ole Miss, and now in his mid-30s, Meek had decided that he would likely spend the rest of his life in higher education and should earn his

doctorate. He took night classes at Ole Miss and prepared for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), but was rejected for the journalism doctoral program because his score fell 10 points below the minimum requirement. And as the episode with Don Sneed would show, the Graduate School was not budging. So, then-chancellor Fortune called the president at USM and secured a spot in the school's brand-new journalism doctoral program for Meek. Meek and his un-air-conditioned Volkswagen made the 300-mile journey down to Hattiesburg, and after being placed in the top floor of the school's new football dormitory, Meek found that he had but one neighbor on the floor – a Black man, Jim Singleton, of New Orleans (Farrar 153-154).

At the end of the summer, their dorm closed, leaving them forced to find somewhere else to stay. The two did something that in Mississippi, circa 1973, was nearly unthinkable. They shared a one-bedroom apartment and slept in the same bed. Meek counted their friendship and their experience living together as a life-changing experience (Farrar 154).

His dissertation focused on what, at the time in Mississippi, had been considered a landmark judicial case, *United Church of Christ v. Federal Communications Commission*. WLBT, now the Jackson, Mississippi, NBC affiliate, had its license revoked by the FCC for featuring content in its news reporting that was found to have racist overtones. Thereafter, Meek was named to the station's operating board, and the "new" news station included African American voices in its operations and reporting (Farrar 154).

In 1976, due to his graduate work completed at Ole Miss, Meek become the first person to achieve the mass communications doctorate degree offered by USM. After that first year in the program, with a required residence in Hattiesburg, he spent the next two commuting from Oxford, and it was during these long car rides that Ed Meek the businessman was born.

Businessman Meek

Meek returned to his post at Ole Miss, now as the director of public information. Sure, that was his official job title, and his main one at that, but Meek had gone to great lengths to diversify his business interests, pursuing ideas he had on those car rides, one of which was for a mini-storage company. When Meek opened it, it became the first of its kind in Oxford, a town now full of storage options for endowed college students (Farrar 154).

Then, the public relations guru Meek, with those same long drives in mind, contacted Southern Airways, a small commercial airline that sent flights across Mississippi, from places like Oxford to Meridian and Hattiesburg. He wrote the company's vice president to persuade him that he needed to hire a part-time public relations man in Mississippi, and that he should hire Meek. The executive responded with a contract that would pay Meek $25 per month, as well as a pass that allowed Meek and his family to fly free with priority seating anywhere.

Meek also started the Furniture Mart in Tupelo, a large exposition that showcases woodworking and furniture products made by local companies and individual creators. He netted $360,000 from the first market, and was holding two per year, in both Oxford and Tupelo. Some years later, the operations would be taken over by Tupelo natives, but the furniture market remains a successful draw, and is housed by several large exposition buildings in Tupelo.

It was the Furniture Mart that first made Ed Meek a wealthy man, and he took a more active role in media, including opening an advertising agency and an educational publishing group. With this, he launched several niche magazines to what he saw as untapped market potential. These included: *Mississippi Pharmacist*, *Satellite TV Opportunities*, *Nightclub & Bar* (a struggling outfit started by a former student), *Beverage Retailer*, *Bar Product News*, *Satellite*

Product News, *Service Tips* and *Restaurant Marketing*, among others. In the consumer market, Meek also ran *Oxford Magazine*, which catered to tourists.

All this side action got Meek summoned to his boss's office in the Lyceum. He was scolded and told that he was expected to give more time and devotion to his Ole Miss job. Meek responded by asking his superior if the herds of cattle that his superior owned were a hobby, or if raising and selling these cows was a business. They left him alone (Farrar 155-156).

With his doctorate, Meek was, by this point, also teaching a class in public relations, but that did not stop his interests from being elsewhere, including the ones explicitly encouraged by those in the Lyceum. Chancellor Fortune sent him to Jackson for a year on loaner to work in Governor Cliff Finch's office, and then Fortune nominated him for a fellowship with the American Council on Education. Meek was selected, and spent a year at the University of Tennessee observing administrators, as he was on track to become one himself because of the promise he had showed as director of public relations and as a professor (Farrar 156).

Meek was well-regarded as a professor, with students praising his expertise in public relations and communications. He helped several students to land their first jobs, and some, he kept up with and helped them to land further jobs. One such student said of Meek, "Dr. Ed Meek taught me one course during my time at Ole Miss but he impacts me today. He taught me by modeling hospitality and networking and kindness" (Farrar 156). Meek himself said that one of his greatest pleasures as a professor was "to help (students) find their places in society."

Ed Meek continued to throw his weight around in many influential corners of Mississippi. He helped to enact legislation creating the Small Business Development Center, which he dreamt up as being to small business what the Department of Agriculture is to farming.

He worked with U.S. Congressman Jamie Whitten, whose district covered Oxford, and got Chancellor Fortune to testify before Congress in support of the bill. He then lobbied Senator James Eastland of Mississippi to request that the bill, which was in committee, be brought to a floor vote. It passed soon after (Farrar 157).

After taking part in thet fellowship at UT, Meek would ultimately get a boosted administrative title, becoming Assistant Vice Chancellor for Public Relations and Marketing. With that title and his teaching in the journalism department, he officially retired from the university in 1998, with some 36 years of experience.

Now able to focus all his energy on business exploits, he continued working as a magazine publisher, which made him only wealthier. A money laundering scheme involving a former friend and banker whom he had hired to do the family's finances, which had grown too large for he and Becky Meek to oversee, lost the Meeks an estimated $500k; the banker did go to jail.

Inspired by his furniture market and with his interest in satellite technologies, Meek began to put on trade shows in industries like that one, and the restaurant and bar industry that some of his publications also dealt with. He held these in cities like Atlantic City, Chicago, Nashville, Orlando, Atlanta and New Orleans, drawing crowds as high as 34,000 people (Farrar 158).

Getting older, the Meeks decided it was time to sell their interests and collect the money. So, they searched for buyers to take on their business interests. They sold to Questex Media Group of Newton, Massachusetts, for an undisclosed amount in the millions of dollars. As part of the sale, and the transition, they demanded that the headquarters would remain in Oxford and

that Ed would remain in charge for the time being. In his last year at the helm, the business netted nearly $5 million, but company executives forced him out due to his age, claiming that he was too old to steer the company to new heights. The next year, the company made only $770,000, and the following year, the new owners were bankrupt. This cost the couple millions of dollars, but they remained very wealthy.

The couple were wealthy enough that, when Ed approached Chancellor Khayat about his business interest, and Khayat countered with an offer to start a school in his name, the $5 million endowment that created the Meek School of Journalism and New Media was not too formidable an amount to endow. It was, at the time, the largest endowment of any individual school in the university, with the millions more that were to be collected as part of the couple's estate after they died (Farrar 159).

In 2009, at the time of the creation of the school, and until 2018, Meek seemingly had an impeccable reputation, and having his name on the school and his continued involvement in Ole Miss journalism through things like *HottyToddy.com*, were all viewed largely as positives, especially given that Meek had made a name for himself throughout the region, if not nationally.

Former Journalism Department Chair Ronald Farrar said of Meek: "In most respects, he was like everybody else. But a couple of things set him apart: He worked hard, harder than most, and he always seemed to be a step or two ahead of the curve." In his old age, he was described as, "still the unpretentious, cheerful, smiling, boyish personage that literally thousands of Mississippians had come to know and like" (Farrar 159).

Whether or not the man himself changed, the perception of him changed forever on Wednesday, September 19, 2018.

Chapter 3 "I hesitated until now…"

Arriving on this Topic

Some things really stay with you. I am a firm believer in school spirit. I own much more Ole Miss apparel than the average person and I ardently support the university. That is also true with the School of Journalism. I arrived on campus in August 2018 as a freshman, and I was excited to get involved with those in Farley.

Just a week or two into classes, the Meek School of Journalism and New Media invited all of its students to the "Meek and Greet," which was kind of a subdued block party with an appearance from the Oxford-based Sno Biz (a shaved ice and dessert shop), music, the opportunity to buy school merchandise, connect with local media employers and student organizations and more. I proudly bought my Meek School of Journalism t-shirt and I enjoyed meeting people affiliated with the school.

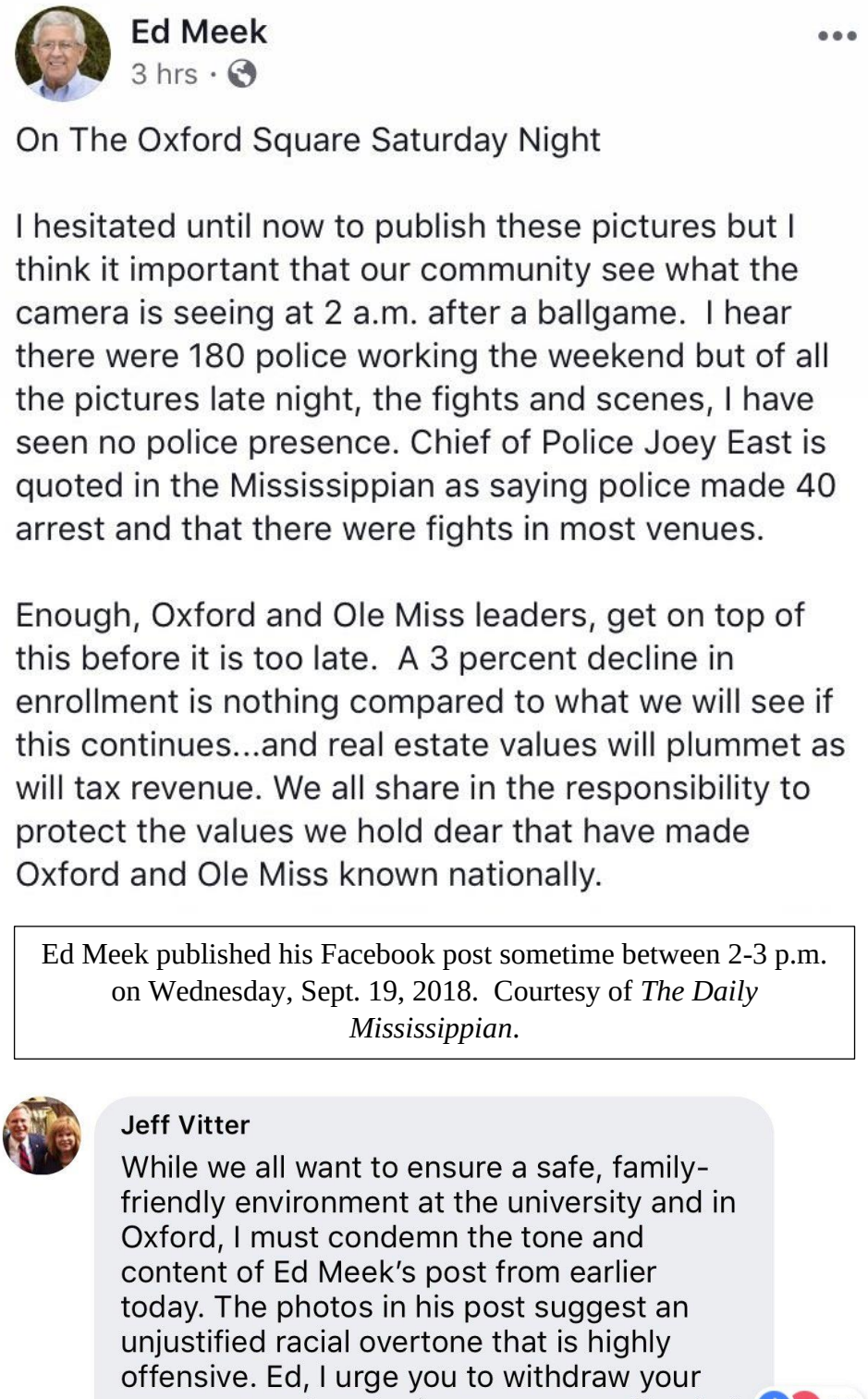
Fast forward a few weeks, and I was walking home from the Turner Center one night after a workout, and I casually checked my phone. That is when I saw that Ed Meek, the school namesake, had shared a Facebook post that afternoon that Chancellor Vitter had responded to by condemning and labeling as having a "racial overtone." I had no idea then what kind of whirlwind the next three months would be for the school and for the university, but I remember fearing the worst, aware even then of the saying, "Ole Miss is always in the news, but never for anything good." While that is certainly hyperbole, it nevertheless added to my concern. As

something that will go down as a major event in university history and that happened after I had been in Oxford just about five weeks, this has stayed with me. It was a formative experience for me as a student at the University of Mississippi, and I knew pretty quickly that when it came time to do my thesis for the Honors College, I wanted to, as a student journalist and journalism major, dig deeper into a defining event for my school and one that challenged student media and raised lots of questions in the Ole Miss community.

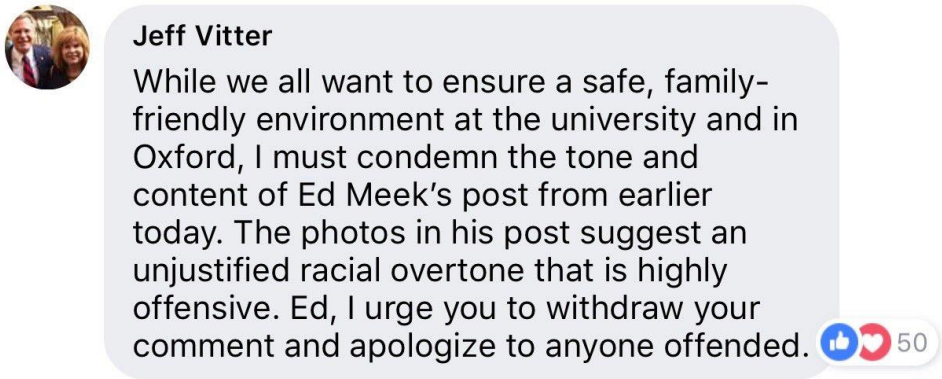
The Post, Vitter's Response and My Thoughts

As I read the words of Meek's post, I remember thinking that while it was something he certainly should not have said, I did not feel that the words had any kind of racist intent. That said, optics are immensely important, and the two pictures he attached showing two Black women in the street near the bars on the Square after the Alabama game that Saturday gave an obvious allusion to Meek's words being racially-motivated, whether they actually were or not.

I knew, though, that once Vitter attached that "racial overtone" label to the post, race would dominate the conversation. I personally felt that Vitter was irresponsible for using that term; I thought that as chancellor of the university, his words carry more weight than maybe anyone else in the community, and that if he said it was racist, that label will forever be attached to it. I thought that the community should have been left to make such a judgement itself, and that Vitter could have condemned the post for exploiting students who were just going about their Saturday night and for invading their privacy by featuring their pictures, without calling it racist.



Ed Meek published his Facebook post sometime between 2-3 p.m. on Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2018. Courtesy of *The Daily Mississippian*.



At 5:53 p.m., just a few hours later, Chancellor Jeffrey Vitter issued the shown response. Courtesy of *The Daily Mississippian*.

Meek School of Journalism and New Media

36 mins ·

Earlier today, the donor whose name is on our school, Ed Meek, made a post on his personal Facebook account that we find highly offensive. This post is in no way associated with or represents our school, our students or our faculty. We are embarrassed by his actions. We agree with our Chancellor Jeff Vitter when he said "We all want to ensure a safe, family-friendly environment at the university and in Oxford, and we condemn the tone and content of this social media post. The photos in his post suggest an unjustified racial overtone that is highly offensive and we urge him to withdraw his comment and apologize to anyone offended."

Will Norton, Dean
Patricia Thompson, Assistant Dean
Debora Wenger, Assistant Dean
Scott Fiene, Assistant Dean
Jennifer Simmons, Assistant Dean

Just after 7 p.m., the deans of the Meek School issued their own statement distancing the school from Meek's comments and agreeing with Vitter's statement, including it in quotations. Courtesy of *The Daily Mississippian*.

Ed Meek

14 mins ·

I apologize to those offended by my post. My intent was to point out we have a problem in The Grove and on the Oxford Square.

Right at 8 p.m., Meek shared this brief post apologizing for his original post and attempting to clarify his intent. But, within 35 minutes, Meek deleted the apology post. Courtesy of *The Daily Mississippian*.

Mahoghany Jordan, left, and Kiyona Crawford, right, who were friends, were the two students that Meek photographed and attached to his Facebook post, which spoke of the university's decline in enrollment, as well as fights and arrests on the Square, and argued that these things would drive down real estate value and tax revenues in Oxford, in addition to deteriorating Oxford and Ole Miss's reputations. By attaching these pictures, Meek seemingly made the two students the faces of the problems he saw, and their both being African American women immediately made the post subject to charges of racism. Photos posted by Ed Meek, courtesy of *The Daily Mississippian*.

Being on campus in September 2018, as an 18-year-old who had just moved away from home and without any previous ties to the university, it was like being forced into a hurricane. Not only was I an Ole Miss student, but one in the Meek School, for that matter. I had to question what the entire situation said about the university and about the School of Journalism, and I found myself wondering quietly if I had made a mistake by choosing to come to school at Ole Miss. Was this going to come to be a defining moment of my college choice and my college career, and would we, as a university and as a school, weather the firestorm that was raging

every day for what felt like then, and still now I remember, as a constant for my entire first semester?

I also felt and feel that what Meek had done did not warrant his name being removed from the School of Journalism, and that what he said in that post had unfairly eradicated a lifetime of achievement and resulted in him being unjustly cast off. But it is an entirely complicated matter, and while this thesis does not purport to reach a finite conclusion, I intend simply to add context to the situation and gain a deeper understanding of the issues at play.

Rapid Change Unfolds

Some in the university community immediately began the calls for the removal of Meek's name. As of 10:30 p.m. on the night of September 19, a petition on Change.org to "Remove Ed Meek's Name From the Ole Miss School of Journalism" had received 580 signatures, just hours after Meek's original post.

The deans of the School of Journalism and New Media wasted no time in response to Meek's post and the subsequent fallout. Just 13 hours after Chancellor Vitter's response, the Meek School faculty met at 7 a.m. on Thursday, September 20, to discuss their plans. This was followed by the release of a video statement just after 2 p.m., in which former Dean Will Norton is joined by the other deans and faculty of the school and condemns Meek's post, saying, "It reeks of racist ideology and misogyny." Norton went on in the video to say, "We have heard the calls for the Meek name to be removed from our building. We have heard the comments that suggest that that response would be too harsh. We are continuing to listen, and continue to respond…We expect to make a recommendation to Chancellor Vitter in the very near future."

Dean Norton is captured in a screenshot from the video the School of Journalism released condemning Meek's post. The video can be seen at: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1767558/Video-Ole-Miss-School-Journalism-responds-Meeks-Facebook-comments.html

That night, the school held a forum at the Nutt Auditorium for students to voice their opinions on the post and what actions should be taken in response. It was open to students in the Meek School at 6:30 p.m., and then at 7:30 p.m., it opened to anyone in the university. It was billed as a "listening session."

Meek School of Journalism and New Media
September 20 at 2:35 PM ·

Dear Students,

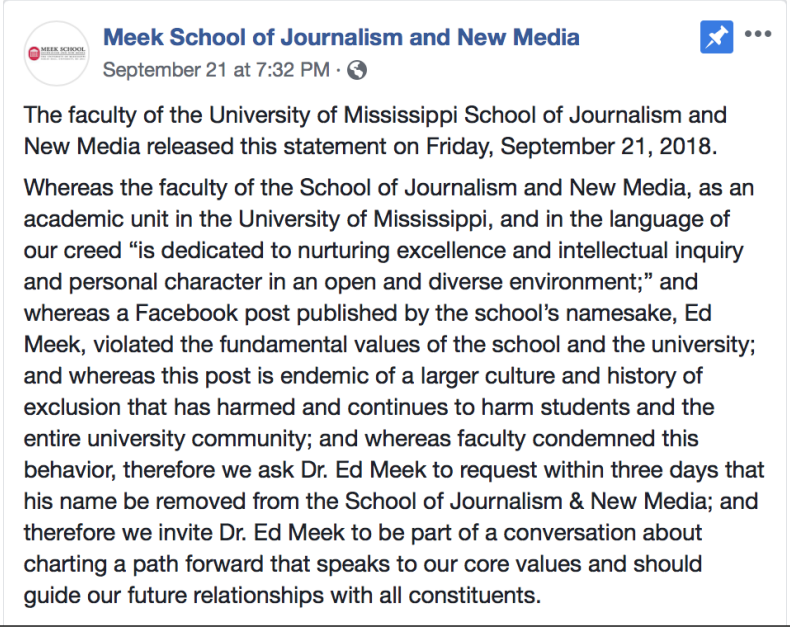
Our school leadership team met with faculty this morning, and we would now very much like to hear from you. If you are able, please join us tonight at 6:30 p.m. in the Nutt Auditorium. This session is open to journalism and IMC students only. An open forum for the university community begins at 7:30 p.m. in the same location.

For us, this is a listening session. We are developing a response and set of solutions that reflect the values of our school. We can only do so if we have your input.

This was the SOJNM's official announcement of the listening session. Courtesy of the *Daily Mississippian*.

The next day, Friday, September 21, at noon, the faculty met again to discuss how to move forward and to write a statement. Then, at 2:30 p.m., Chancellor Vitter released a letter that included the possible steps for removing Meek's name from the journalism school.

The SOJNM followed with its statement at 7:32 p.m., in which it formally asked Ed Meek to request within three days that his name be removed from the school.



Meek School of Journalism and New Media
September 21 at 7:32 PM ·

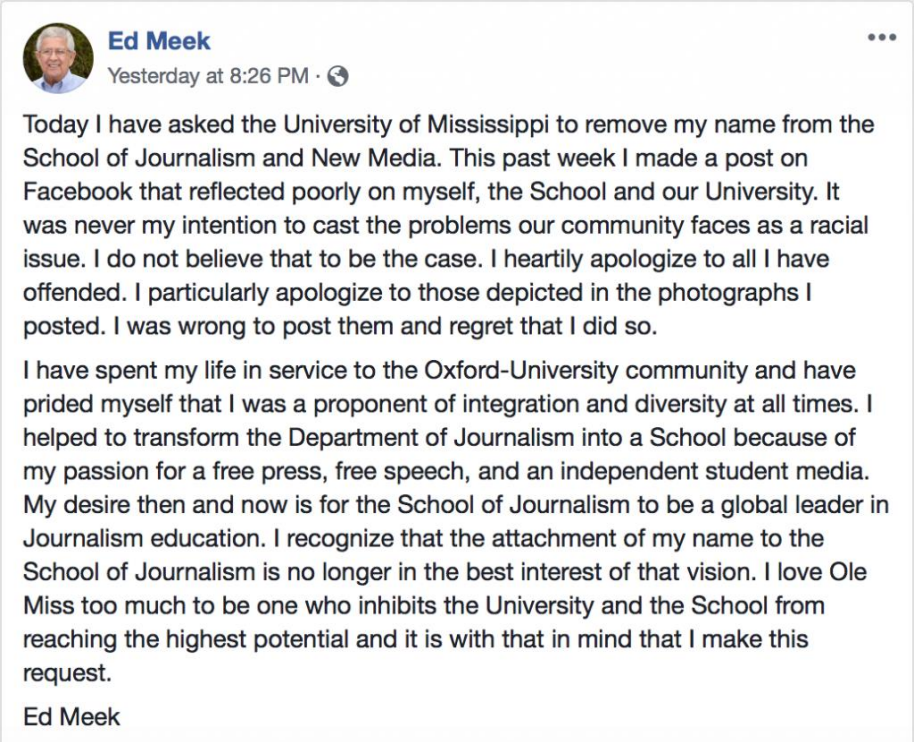
The faculty of the University of Mississippi School of Journalism and New Media released this statement on Friday, September 21, 2018.

Whereas the faculty of the School of Journalism and New Media, as an academic unit in the University of Mississippi, and in the language of our creed "is dedicated to nurturing excellence and intellectual inquiry and personal character in an open and diverse environment;" and whereas a Facebook post published by the school's namesake, Ed Meek, violated the fundamental values of the school and the university; and whereas this post is endemic of a larger culture and history of exclusion that has harmed and continues to harm students and the entire university community; and whereas faculty condemned this behavior, therefore we ask Dr. Ed Meek to request within three days that his name be removed from the School of Journalism & New Media; and therefore we invite Dr. Ed Meek to be part of a conversation about charting a path forward that speaks to our core values and should guide our future relationships with all constituents.

The statement, which reads like a governmental resolution, said that Meek "violated the fundamental values of the school and the university," and blamed Meek with larger societal issues at hand: "this post is endemic of a larger culture and history of exclusion that has harmed and continues to harm students and the entire university community." Courtesy of the *Daily Mississippian*.

Just over 24 hours later, at 8:26 p.m. on Saturday night, Meek responded with a long Facebook post in which he follows the request of the School of Journalism that he ask his name to be removed. He cites his love for Ole Miss as the reason for doing so, and said that his post reflected poorly on himself, the School and the University. He further said that he never intended to portray the issues he saw in the community as racial, and he apologized to "all I have

offended," and "those depicted in the photographs I posted," without naming the two women. Meek presents himself in the post as someone who "was a proponent of integration and diversity at all times," and said that because "the attachment of my name to the School of Journalism is no longer in the best interest…" he would like his name to be removed so that he does not inhibit the School and university from "reaching its highest potential."



Ed Meek
Yesterday at 8:26 PM ·

Today I have asked the University of Mississippi to remove my name from the School of Journalism and New Media. This past week I made a post on Facebook that reflected poorly on myself, the School and our University. It was never my intention to cast the problems our community faces as a racial issue. I do not believe that to be the case. I heartily apologize to all I have offended. I particularly apologize to those depicted in the photographs I posted. I was wrong to post them and regret that I did so.

I have spent my life in service to the Oxford-University community and have prided myself that I was a proponent of integration and diversity at all times. I helped to transform the Department of Journalism into a School because of my passion for a free press, free speech, and an independent student media. My desire then and now is for the School of Journalism to be a global leader in Journalism education. I recognize that the attachment of my name to the School of Journalism is no longer in the best interest of that vision. I love Ole Miss too much to be one who inhibits the University and the School from reaching the highest potential and it is with that in mind that I make this request.

Ed Meek

Courtesy of the *Daily Mississippian*.

That same night, Vitter issued an official response. It read:

> "For more than 50 years, Ed Meek has played a critical role in moving our university forward. While his request tonight to remove his name from the Meek School of Journalism and New Media was made selflessly to permit the university to move forward, it is nonetheless regrettable and poignant. A primary hallmark of leadership is the willingness to sacrifice personal gain for the betterment of the

> whole. We commend the Meek family for their heartfelt response to the concerns of the UM community. We also acknowledge with appreciation and thanks their ongoing and permanent contributions to the university, which will be recognized by the Meek family's legacy commitment to all things Ole Miss."

On Monday, September 25, and at Dean Norton's request, Chancellor Vitter announced that the name removal process, which requires final say-so by the state Institutions of Higher Learning, would be expedited. Amid calls for the university to return the Meek's donation that helped found the SOJNM, Vitter said in a statement that "the terms of the original agreement governing the management of these funds prohibit the university from making such a move unilaterally" (Vance).

That night, the Undergraduate Council and Graduate Council, which are distinct and comprised of faculty at their respective levels of teaching, plus one voting student member each, voted via email about whether or not to accept the School of Journalism's request to remove the Meek name. The votes passed in both councils, by undisclosed totals (Vance). Then, on Thursday, September 27, the Council of Academic Administrators, which is chaired by Provost Noel Wilkin and comprised of the various deans of the academic colleges and schools, among others, voted as well to support the removal of the Meek name.

Then, somewhat surprisingly, Chancellor Vitter waited 12 days to act on the votes of the respective bodies, which drew a response from *The Daily Mississippian* only 5 days later, on October 2. The article, titled "UM chancellor has yet to vote on Meek name removal," quoted Vitter's September 25 statement outlining the steps for moving forward with the name change, in which Vitter said, "If (the vote) is approved…I will refer the request to the IHL Board for consideration on an expedited basis" (Vance). The article insinuates that Vitter had reneged on

his word after his calls for the process to be expedited. Both the IHL communications director and UM Communications declined to comment on whether Vitter had taken any action since the 25th of September.

It would be another week before Vitter would act, when on Tuesday, October 9, he announced that he would recommend to the IHL the removal of Meek's name from the Meek School of Journalism and New Media.

At the IHL's next meeting on October 18, it decided to vote on Vitter's recommendation, when the 12-member board voted unanimously to grant the name removal. It would take two months for Meek's name to be removed from Farley Hall, when on December 18, it was taken down, leaving only "School of Journalism and New Media." Meek responded to this happening in a December 27 Facebook post: "This is the saddest day of my life. My intended response was only to the increasing violence in our community, but this was twisted into an unintended racial issue." Meek went on to mention his African American roommate at Southern Miss, referenced here on page 36. "I am not a racist. No greater shame can be done than to know that I have brought shame to our Ole Miss, friends and to my family," he said (Hitson).

Ed Meek
December 27, 2018 ·

This is the saddest day of my life.

I re-posted videos of brawls at Huddle House, Lyric, The Grove and one still photo but the Chancellor and administration choose to focus on one photo only. My intended reference was only to the increasing violence in our community but this was twisted into an unintended racial issue.

At my request, I had an African-American roommate for a year in 1974. Becky and I were among a small number who led the community in the peaceful integration of public schools in Oxford and we have supported many African-American students and others deserving throughout the years. I am not a racist.

I never imagined my life would end this way. No greater damage can be done to my soul than to know I have brought shame to our Ole Miss, friends and to my family.

Meek's December 27, 2018, post calls it "the saddest day of my life. He says, "I am not a racist." Courtesy of the *Daily Mississippian*.

A year and one day after Meek's post set off a firestorm, it was revealed on September 20, 2019, that he was removing his $5.3 million endowment that had created the School of Journalism and New Media, and would be moving it to the CREATE foundation in Tupelo. The process to withdraw the money had begun during the controversy in the prior year, however, as on November 1, 2018, Ed and Becky Meek requested that the University liquidate the present value of their endowment. In a July 15, 2019, affidavit in Lafayette County Chancery Court, Meek said, "As a consequence of a long series of events, summarized in the Petition and Motion to Interplead, it is now impossible for the Gift to be used as once intended. My wife and I now desire the Gift to be re-directed" (Thompson). Due to interest accrued, the Meeks were returned $6.4 million, including $1.1 million in interest, minus what of the original donation had been used. CREATE is the oldest community foundation in Mississippi and became the sole stockholder of the Journal Publishing Company, Inc., which publishes the *Tupelo Daily Journal* (Thompson).

Amid a pandemic in 2020 in which money has been tight universally, the absence of the Meek donation has been felt in the School of Journalism. Entities of the Student Media Center, which benefitted from the Meek endowment, are feeling the effects. Now, even as most of the university is shifting to resume normal operations, *The Daily Mississippian*, which was at the time of the Meek controversy a four-papers-per-week publication, now publishes only once a week, despite the name – on Thursdays. NewsWatch Ole Miss, the University's television newscast and the only TV news in Oxford, has been celebrated for its nightly news program that airs online and on cable televisions in Oxford at 5 p.m. weeknights. It is now only twice a week, and only resumed live shows two weeks ago (as of March 2021). I can confirm that I have heard

from others, as someone who has worked for all four entities of the SMC, that the absence of the Meek endowment has directly related to financial strain in student media at Ole Miss.

Dean Norton acknowledged in an April 9, 2019, article in *The DM* the cost of the Meek debacle. He faced the realization of having to return not only the $6 million endowment (with interest) that Meek had conferred in 2009, but also the millions more that his estate was prepared to give Ole Miss upon he and Becky Meek's death. "We would have been one of the wealthiest journalism schools in the country. So (removing Meek's name) was not a small decision that the faculty made" (Richmond). This really raises a larger question about not only Ole Miss, but at every university. What is the cost of cutting ties with controversial donors, and at what point do donors have autonomy to say and do as they please? Meek's statement reflected poorly on the university, sure, but in relating to that question of autonomy, are private donors, when making public statements, still private citizens, or do they make themselves into public figures by saying things like Meek did, especially when statements go viral?

Bombshell

The uniformly-accepted stream of events over the final four months of 2018 was significantly challenged. Over the course of August 2-4, 2020, *Mississippi Free Press* published a three-part series that greatly reshaped the dynamics of the Meek controversy, proved, if nothing else, that the situation was entirely more complicated than previously thought.

In part 1, "'The Fabric is Torn in Oxford': UM Officials Decried Racism Publicly, Coddled It Privately," it was revealed that despite standing upfront in that video released the day after Meek's post and saying that it "reeked of racist ideology," Dean Will Norton had actually

been complicit in what is portrayed as a systemically toxic relationship in the university with its donors.

It was believed that it was Ed Meek who had taken those two still photos of the two Black women. However, Meek did not take them at all, but rather they were screenshots from a video sent to Dean Norton, from a wealthy university athletics donor named Blake Tart, III. When Norton stood up front in that video decrying Meek's post, he had seen the video containing those images days before. While *Mississippi Free Press*' public records act revealed that Tartt had sent both the video and the screenshots to Norton, it is unknown if Meek received the video too.

Tartt had shot the video on the Square on September 15, the night of the Ole Miss – Alabama football game. In it, he narrates very racist commentary on Oxford, saying, "Goddamn, this is literally like being in the Congo jungle" (Pittman). He accused the Black women in the video of being "Black hookers," saying "It made me sick." Tartt, who at that time was serving on the Meek School Board of Visitors, emailed Norton with the video and the two screenshots that Meek would post, on September 17. Norton did not decry the video or Tartt's comments, but responded that he too "had a number of misgivings about the direction of the culture" in Oxford (Pittman).

Norton never revealed, certainly not publicly, but even privately, that he had been in possession of Tartt's video or the photos, as in administrative meetings in which he was present, others questioned the source of the pictures. Leaked audio from a meeting in the wake of Meek's post reveal that Rachel West, who had been CEO of *HottyToddy.com*, which Meek founded, had turned down Meek's request that she do a story on *HottyToddy* with the pictures and about prostitution, crime and fights in Oxford. She reveals that she advised Meek not to

make such a post on his own, either. Professor Alysia Steele, a Black photography professor in the School, asked who, then, took the photos. West responded that she believed that Tartt had taken them, and that it was not Meek. *HottyToddy* editor-in-chief Anna Grace Usery then said that while she was not sure whether or not Tartt took them himself or someone had sent them to him, she knew in fact that Tartt had sent them to Meek. During this entire exchange and despite knowing, Norton was silent (Pittman). He ended the meeting not long after, even as professors' questions about the situation went unanswered.

Blake Tartt III (right), who made several disparaging comments about Black people in his emails, including likening them to apes and the jungle, stands next to UM civil rights legend, James Meredith, at a Grove tailgate years before. Courtesy of *Mississippi Free Press*.

When the leaked audio was reported by Adam Ganucheau of Mississippi Today nearly a month after Meek's post, in October 2018, it set off a "witch hunt" in the SOJNM to find out who had leaked the recording. Norton reached out to the university's general counsel and provost and called the leak "treacherous."

The article also revealed that on graduation day in May 2018, months before the Meek incident, Norton, who as an administrator wore a doctoral hood, was standing next to Jennifer Sadler, a Black professor. Sadler, who was not wearing a hood, asked Norton about his. "Oh this? It's my Klan hood" (Pittman). While it was an attempt at humor by Norton, it drew awkward laughs from other faculty, and Sadler was taken aback by the comment. After teaching courses at UM that summer, Sadler departed for another university, and found out later that Norton had apologized to the School faculty after the provost found out about it. Sadler recalled how, upon her telling Norton that she was leaving, his initial reaction was, "We can't afford to lose a Black faculty member right now" (Pittman). She also said that people in the African American community had found comments by Meek over the years to be offensive, and that Norton "wouldn't have endorsed taking Meek's name off the building if there wasn't public outrage about it" (Pittman).

Sadler did somewhat defend Norton's email exchanges with Tartt, though, saying that he "is in a really strange position at his job because he is responsible for basically getting money for the school. So, it's not like he can ruffle any feathers in his mission to get money, and most of the money is going to come from wealthy white people." She went on, though, to attribute this to what she sees as a problematic large-scale issue within the university's fundraising. "All of that is also really problematic, because you have people that are willing to profit over people and not really push back at all" (Pittman).

During Meek's email correspondence with Tartt, he was never found to have used racist or sexist viewpoints, but he would brush off such comments by Tartt, who he had been trying to solicit fundraising from for the Meek School. Despite his reputation as a progressive school leader, he was charged with tolerating bigotry in pursuit of money. In a September 2018 exchange days before the video and pictures that would spur the Meek post, Tartt wrote Norton about the Serena Williams incident days before in which the tennis player had smashed a racket on the ground after being accused of cheating by a male umpire, whom she charged with sexism. Tartt said Williams looked like an ape, which is a derogatory comparison that has often been used against Black people. Tartt went on about Williams cheating and a "lawless society" and how she got beat fairly. Norton brushed the comments off and responded, "It is a great story, showing how messed up we are. We need to have mercy and forgiveness" (Pittman). Despite Norton's gentle response, Tartt doubled down on the ape reference in his own short reply.

Norton was vying for Tartt's money to fund another Farley Hall expansion and for a new real-estate marketing program with the Integrated Marketing Communications program, which was Tartt's own idea. Tartt is a wealthy real estate developer in Houston (TX), and his company, New Regional Planning, has an Oxford branch. Norton agreed to hire a faculty member on the subject, which was Lloyd "Chip" Wade, who had taught finance in the business school at UM. In fall 2018, Wade taught IMC 591, a one-time special topics class on "Real Estate Promotion."

In August 2018, UM officials had wined and dined Tartt on an Oxford visit that came weeks before the Alabama football game. Tartt at the time told school officials that they had made him feel like he was back at the "Ole Miss" he remembered from long ago (Pittman).

Tartt and Norton corresponded often via email about current events and politics, including Senator John McCain's death and calls to rename the Russell Senate Building after

McCain. Norton referred to the ever-present reckoning currently happening in American society around renaming statues and monuments and buildings, saying "The conversation I am referring to is the big emphasis that if someone had politically incorrect attitudes, he should have his statue torn down, or his name taken off a building. The trend will begin to be, keep history as it is." This is seen as an eerie foreshadowing of what was to come weeks later, when Norton pivoted on his own statement in calling for the removal of Meek's name.

That September 15, 2018, Alabama game, which Tartt attended, he was joined by Norton. After the game, Norton dropped Tartt off on the Square, where Tartt later filmed his "Congo Jungle" video. In the video, Tartt can be seen interacting with others, and at one point, the camera captures several white women wearing clothes no less revealing than those on the two Black women he would criticize and describe as "hookers." Norton simply replied to the video, "Big Problem!" (Pittman).

In response to a later email, Norton said, "Blake, I have been really disappointed for a long time with the way this culture is going." In private, Norton was making statements to Tartt that were not much different than the kind of cultural criticisms that Meek would include in his post just two days later. In a later reply, Tartt labels the problems as a property issue, a seed that he perhaps planted in Meek's head in their own email exchanges, saying "I was up until 3:30 a.m. touring my property. The fabric is torn in Oxford. Mayor Robyn (Tannehill) and the board of aldermen have let it go to (sic) far and my belief is it can't be fixed" (Pittman). Tartt also brought up the post-game fights on the Square and in the Grove after the game, which occurred among White people as well as African Americans. Meek too would bring up the fighting issue in his post.

Part 2 of the *Mississippi Free Press* series, "'The Ole Miss We Know': Wealthy Alums Fight to Keep UM's Past Alive," takes Ed Meek to task for some of the controversial and racially insensitive stances he took as the university's public relations director. After an event in April 1983 when a group of White students surrounded the on-campus house of Phi Beta Sigma, a Black fraternity and the only Black Greek house on campus, singing "Dixie" and shouting the N-word, Meek looked a United Press International reporter in the eye and said, "It was nothing but a spring pep rally." The reporter wrote in his story, "Perhaps it was only a (spring pep rally) to a man who has the perspective of Meek, a member of the Class of 1962" (Pittman).

The year before, after Black male cheerleader John Hawkins notoriously refused to carry the Confederate battle flag out on the football field, as was tradition, Meek found himself in another controversy. At the time, Confederate flags were waved all throughout the crowd at university football games, and the university itself would actually order thousands of little Confederate flags to pass out to students annually. Rumors were circulating, and angry calls were flooding the university from White alumni, that Ole Miss had ordered Mississippi state flags as a move to replace the usage of the Confederate flag at sporting events. Meek told the Associated Press that this was not true, that the university had ordered only one state flag, and that it had no intention (at least at that time) of banning the Confederate battle flag at games (Pittman).

In 1988, five years after a White mob tried to intimidate Phi Beta Sigma, the fraternity was preparing to move into a house on Fraternity Row, and it would have been the only Black frat house on the street, until it caught fire and set off accusations of arson. Then, in 1989, pledges with Beta Theta Pi, a predominantly White fraternity (undoubtedly all-White in 1989) kidnapped a member of the frat and another pledge, painted their bodies with racial slurs and

racist graffiti, and drove them up to Holly Springs to the campus of Rust College, a historically Black college. The two were taken into custody, and after a decade of really bad press for Ole Miss's Greek system, Meek tried to play it down to the AP, saying "They had no idea there were racial connotations in it. They should have, but they appeared to not have viewed it that way." He went on to tell the AP that the university was treating the act as "a very serious violation of good taste and ethics on our campus," and the chancellor banned the fraternity from campus for three years.

The correspondence regarding the night of the Alabama game continued up until just two days before Meek's Facebook post. On September 17, 2018, Tartt emailed Norton again, calling the Black women in his video and pictures "African hookers." He also expressed his disappointment that things at Ole Miss had changed. "This is serious. I know how hard it must be. The Ole Muss Culture has been ruined (sic). It will never be fixed. Just like Houston it will never be the same." It seems that Tartt was mourning the loss of a Whiter Oxford, just like a Whiter Houston. Norton responded by tiptoeing around the bigoted comments, saying that he was "trying to keep building the Meek School," but could not "concentrate on the ineptitude around me" (Pittman). Tartt further commented on the band no longer playing Dixie and the replacement of Colonel Reb with the Landshark.

Even after the Meek controversy, these correspondences continued. February 2019 emails go on about school symbols. "Lame out of state liberals, punk spoiled rotten millennials and racist faculty members have totally ruined what was the greatest place on EARTH!...The money will dry up, and those who tore the traditions apart will have no memories and realize how great the sound of DIXIE was when they can't put food on the table." Norton challenged Tartt on these comments, saying that the early 1980s were the most controversial years he could

remember at Ole Miss, and not at all full of glory that Tartt recollected. During that period, the Klan marched onto campus, and Hawkins refused to carry the Confederate flag. "I had to go to the chancellor to ask (him) to ask one of our graduates, an African American woman, to return to Ole Miss to help Black students who were going to blow the place apart in controversy…The only people who talk bad about the place are alumni…and it usually is those off the campus who are upset with the university," Norton said (Pittman).

The perceived poor treatment of Ed Meek by the university did create a very big problem among private donors, though, as the university missed its fiscal year 2019 fundraising mark by a lot. Coming directly off the Meek controversy, psychology professor James Thomas' political tweet, more debate over the Confederate monument, Vitter's resignation and the firestorm appointment of a new chancellor, as well as a neo-Confederate rally on campus that led basketball players to kneel for the National Anthem, it was a turbulent year, and Meek had really taken the cake, so to speak. Against a goal of $118.6 million, the university raised only $102.8 million, falling short by 13%.

Prominent donors, including those who had studied journalism at Ole Miss, discontinued their giving. Editor and publisher of the Neshoba Democrat, Jim Prince III, said, "I'm done with Ole Miss. If you can give me a contact or have them call to confirm, I would really appreciate it." Prince went on in defense of Meek, saying that he is not racist, but "the latest victim of the ideologically-driven, nameless, faceless mob whose offense trophy can never be filled with enough victims of deliberately twisted words and surmised intentions." Prince also doubled down on Meek's comments about the state of Oxford: "The debauchery on the Square is something that concerns all of us as graduates of the University. He was attempting to address a real problem, regardless of race…Ed Meek is not the problem. Our culture has failed."

Sidna Brower Mitchell, who was editor of *The DM* during the integration crisis and who had penned an op-ed in *The DM* in defense of Meek in 2018, ceased her donations, too. "Based on the way Ole Miss is headed, especially after the 'outrage' over Ed Meek's Facebook post, I no longer feel loyal to nor do I care to donate to the University of Mississippi."

Some, like Prince, put the blame on Vitter as well. "(He) threw a good man under the bus who has dedicated his entire life to make the University of Mississippi better and open to all. Vitter has divided the Ole Miss family and it is offensive." Another donor accused Vitter of making the situation "exponentially worse by responding in public…I have had my fill of him."

Countless others retracted donations by making statements to the university in defense of Meek, against James Thomas, against Vitter, or some combination of the three. The perceived treatment of Meek threatened to stifle pending donations as well. Jim and Thomas Duff, the two wealthiest people in Mississippi, agreed to give Ole Miss $26 million over the course of twenty years to fund a massive STEM building that will bear their names. Before the agreement was final, however, they wanted protection against another Meek-like event. "Jim wants some kind of statement in the agreement that would address this situation: If the university takes their names off the building, they want their money back. (This is because of the Ed Meek situation. They said they are conservative, non-drinkers, but someone associated with them could do something bad and then the university might associate that bad behavior with the Duffs)," UM Vice Chancellor for Development Charlotte Parks said in an email. Although it is not clear if the stipulation was granted, the donation became public on February 5, 2020.

Adjunct university professor Leslie Westbrook corresponded multiple times with Dean Norton about Meek. As an experienced professional in crisis management, she told Norton that she could have helped to solved tensions with Ed and Becky Meek. Westbrook took an approach

of reconciliation, but other faculty did not want this, and school leadership would not back her on it. Charles Overby denied that it was a crisis and told Westbrook that it would simply die down. "It has not died down. Ed took his money back. Every time there is an opportunity for Ed to reiterate that you, Will and the faculty threw him under the bus…he has jumped on it with fervor. It is not over. We did not need Ed and Becky as enemies. They are our enemies," Westbrook wrote.

At the same time, Westbrook was having her own problems as a donor, as she had donated $400k of a $500k pledge for a planned consumer research center, but without any real progress, she pressed Norton about it, doubtful that it would ever be built. She had planned to donate $2 million in estate assets to the school, but because of the lack of progress on the project she wanted, she threatened to walk back her pledge.

Norton responded to her by saying that he had attempted to reconcile personally with Ed Meek, but Meek had refused to speak with him, because of beliefs that Norton had "orchestrated this against him." Despite Meek's refusal to talk to Norton and others in the journalism school, he continued, in 2019, to work with Charlotte Parks to help connect her to potential donors. In at least one email, Meek complained to her about the university's treatment of him.

By late 2019, Norton was not so friendly with Tartt anymore, after several attempts by university officials to take Tartt to lunch and over a year of courting the man for a donation. Tartt sent a typical email, on November 20, 2019, complaining about the poor football game attendance and dropping enrollment, blaming this on "that past management group in the Lyceum." Norton replied shortly, "Blake, thank you for your insights."

Norton then forwarded Tartt's email, and his response, to the provost and to Athletic Director Keith Carter. "Noel and Keith, I thought you should see this email from Blake Tartt

and my response to him. He has not contributed to our school despite our attempts to be kind to him. He is in agreement with Lee Habeeb and Ed Meek," Norton wrote. Tartt never gave a dime to the SOJNM, and the retail communications program that he had pledged to fund, and that the school had hired Chip Wade to teach a course in, never got funded and was dropped. Chip Wade never taught the course again after Fall 2018.

In March 2020, Dean Will Norton received a public records request from a group called "Transparent Ole Miss." It sought copies of emails from his university address containing the keywords and phrases, "Klan Hood," "Adam Ganucheau," "media policy" and "Shep Smith," as well as emails he had sent and received from Blake Tartt and Ed Meek. Norton reached out to the university's general counsel and asked if it would be best to resign as dean, just as COVID-19 was forcing faculty and administration to shift operations online. Erica McKinley, the school attorney, said she would handle it, and Norton thanked her.

While school officials worked on the request, Tartt responded to a fundraising email and ended any speculation about whether he would ever donate money. "Are you crazy?" Tart wrote on March 28, 2020. "Ole Miss no longer hold (sic) the values that made it so might and great!" Despite this, officials in the athletics department decided to keep pursuing Tartt.

Transparent Ole Miss started sending out copies of emails that had been processed while fulfilling the public records request, including those in 2018 from Tartt that identified the source of the infamous photos and Norton's priviness to that fact.

The released emails revealed that in October 2019, Norton had called Shepard Smith, who had just resigned Fox News, "very troubled," as a response to an email showing surprise that Smith is gay. In Norton's email, he mentioned Smith having been married to a woman

before. This came at the same time that Norton had courted the alum to come back to campus and speak to students. On his campus visit, I met Smith and took a picture with him. Norton's email calling Smith "very troubled," had come just two days before the visit to campus.

Transparent Ole Miss was strategically sending out copies of particular Norton emails among the faculty. A university ombudsman revealed that there were several emails found "disparaging to homosexuals in general, and to UM alumnus Shepard Smith in particular," as well as other sensitive topics. The faculty member who had received the emails "felt intimidated by Dean Norton in the past," and was "concerned that the emails may find their way to the press," all of these comments came by way of Paul Caffera, the ombudsman, in writing to Provost Noel Wilkin.

Oddly enough, Norton wrote Wilkin on April 1, 2020, after it was discovered that a set of now-public emails had been sent to Shepard Smith and the Center for Inclusion and Cross-Cultural Engagement. He told the provost that Blake Tartt had told him several months ago that there was going to be a "campaign" against him and that he should talk to chancellor about resigning. Tartt even said that he would set up the meeting for Norton. "I am not sure who I can send an email to to apologize…This puzzles me because I do not want to be the center of a controversy for the university," Norton said in his email to Wilkin.

On April 2, Westbrook emailed Norton that she too had received some emails from an anonymous source who identified as Winston Smith, the name of a character in Orwell's *1984*. "The sender asked her if she was aware of Norton's involvement with 'the person who pressured Ed Meek to publish those photos on Facebook,' noting that it 'sure seems like Norton shares Blake Tartt's racial views and was happy to throw Ed Meek under the bus'" (Pittman). Westbrook asked Norton if he knew why she was receiving these emails. "I will gladly resign if

folk want me to do so," Norton said. "I am very upset with the way I am getting portrayed after being portrayed all these years as a radical. I have been supportive of Shep throughout his career and all the students I have known. I do not know why someone would be doing this so publicly instead of coming to me and asking me to resign."

On an April 23, Zoom meeting, Norton told the journalism faculty that he was going to meet with the provost that afternoon, and before 5 p.m., the provost announced to the university that Norton had decided to return to the faculty. Debora Wenger, who would be named interim dean thereafter, shared a note from Norton about his resignation. Norton cited his age and concerns about the virus as his motivations for stepping down, saying nothing of the recent circulation of his emails. Norton later told the faculty that he should have retired from being dean four years prior, and that 78 was in the high-risk group for COVID-19. He expressed fears over having to shelter-in-place for the rest of his life, but revealed in a meeting that he would be remaining as faculty to teach writing courses. Norton curiously had a request for his colleagues, that he wanted to stay out of future drama. "The only thing I ask is that people not talk to me about the school. I don't want to be the source for any trouble for anybody who is the administrator after me. I will come and I will be at the office eight hours a day, and I will teach my classes, but I won't do much socializing. I'm going to be an outlier, but I will do my duty as hard as I can…But I don't want to be part of the politics of the school."

Norton's resignation took effect on May 11, 2020. In July, he resigned from the board of directors of the journalism non-profit Mississippi Today. Within 21 months of each other, the School of Journalism and New Media was now without both its founding namesake and its first dean.

Declining to Participate

When I started to work on this project, I was really hoping to interview Ed Meek and/or Jeff Vitter, knowing that as the two voices that really set this controversy and all of its fallout into place, interviewing them would greatly enhance my work. I especially was hoping to talk to Meek, because despite everything that has been said about him, and all that happened after his Facebook post, he has been a relative recluse, declining to comment to media outlets about the situation and refusing to grant interviews to interested parties.

Unsurprisingly, both Meek and Vitter declined to talk to me, even after I gave full disclosure to them about the nature of the product and assured both of them that any and all statements they shared with me would be withheld from any outside publishing, either by me or by my sharing with an outlet. I stressed the academic nature of the project, and that I was not looking to profit from or stir up the controversy, only to enhance my personal understanding and add context to the situation.

I thought that maybe my best chance at securing an interview with either of them was the opportunity for them to speak in clarification of what happened in 2018. I particularly thought that Meek, after two years of people speaking about him, and on his behalf, might want to set the record straight, as it were. But it was not to be.

I cannot say whether or not Meek's responses to me were to "play up" the emotional aspect of the situation as a way to generate pity for himself. Regardless, I did feel badly for him, and after the two emailed responses I received for him, I can say that what happened to him, right or wrong, does not make me happy.

In his first response to me on September 3, 2020, Meek was extremely brief. His email read, "My family and I have been unjustly destroyed and we can endure no more pain. Ed." His email signature contained the logo for the National Graphene Association (which I will get to later).

Then, after consulting with Professor Mitchell, my advisor, I responded to Meek with the offer to courteously submit to him a draft of this thesis with the opportunity to read it and offer an objection or addition to any of the content contained herein. His second email, on that same day, was a little longer: "Thank you Mason but I respectively must decline. I did not sleep one minute last night thing (sic) about all this. Too much anxiety. I cannot change what has happened and must put my health first. I have to put this behind me. Best wishes to you. Ed."

I turned my focus to Vitter, and while his declination was very simple in nature, it provided a lot of context to the situation and his role in it. Jeff Vitter announced his resignation as chancellor of the University of Mississippi on November 12, 2018, not even a full two months after his initial statement against Meek's post and his actions thereafter, and he formally stepped down in January 2019. At just over three years at the university's helm, Vitter became the second-shortest tenured chancellor in school history, after the first one, George Holmes, stayed in the position for just a year.

While Vitter made no explicit statements about his reasons for resigning, *The Daily Mississippian* article announcing the news mentioned that Vitter saw the university "through a time of cultural transition" (Rand). Vitter's statement mentioned, "we are a more diverse community with a more visible dedication to inclusion and civility" (Rand).

His tenure, though, has come to be aligned with an increasingly divided campus. Vitter tried to find middle ground on issues, but usually ended up angering both sides. Some of the biggest achievements he touted were bringing down the old Mississippi state flag in 2015, hiring a Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Community Engagement, installing contextualization plaques in campus spots of controversy and the university's growing minority enrollment (Minority enrollment grew from 23% in Fall 2015 to 23.7% in Fall 2018, although African American enrollment fell from 13.4% to 12.5%).

Some of Vitter's more controversial positions and decisions, culminating with the Meek situation, compelled a group to form in fall 2018 called "Stand Fast Ole Miss," which accused Vitter of having a left-wing bias.

"Our goal is to bring Ole Miss back to a place where the Lyceum has as much regard and respect for defending conservative stances as it has demonstrated for more extreme liberal postures. Our Chancellor must be a strong arbiter of determining when the privileges of 'academic freedom' and 'free speech' are being abused to the detriment of our University," Hayes Dent, the founder of the organization, said (Rand).

When Vitter wrote an op-ed to *The DM* in response to a faculty report that condemned the university's racial climate, he derided the study's protocols and its very nature. This, coupled with a Facebook post criticizing sociology professor James Thomas' viral tweet that called for protestors to disrupt Republican senators' meals, earned him the ire of the campus' political left, too (Rand).

Vitter, who before his time as an administrator had been a celebrated computer scientist, made his move to resign as chancellor a surprising self-imposed demotion, as he accepted a

faculty position in the School of Engineering's Department of Computer and Information Science.

Then, in March 2019, Vitter was back in headlines, as it was reported that he was named a finalist for president at the University of South Florida. But what was more illuminating was when the Tampa Bay Times reported that Vitter had revealed in his interview for the position the exact reasons he had resigned at Ole Miss. Vitter claimed that he had been hired at UM as an "agent of change," but then said, "I made the mistake of underestimating, really, the level of entrenchment and lack of common agreement at Ole Miss…That attention really drew away…from academic issues" (Usery). He told the USF hiring committee Mississippi's Civil War History and the effects of the Hugh Freeze NCAA investigation had hindered his ability to enact progress here. When USF announced its next president on July 1, 2019, it was not Jeffery Vitter, though, and he quietly remained on faculty.

In his emailed response to me, Vitter revealed that he had formally retired from Ole Miss in July 2020. "Mason, It's good to hear from you. I unfortunately must decline to participate. I retired from Ole Miss two months ago. My direct statements (which are sometimes not what was attributed to me by *The DM* or other media) can speak for themselves. Good luck with your thesis. Regards, - Jeff."

This closed the book on my contact with Vitter and Meek, and even without their participation, I was ready to grapple with my research questions. I did find it interesting that Vitter, who became a star of *The DM*'s reporting during the Meek saga, hinted at having an issue with the way he was portrayed in its coverage. I digress.

Chapter 4 *The DM* Says "Enough"

The Daily Mississippian's coverage of the Meek saga began just hours after Meek's post when the paper's Twitter account first tweeted at 6:14 p.m. on September 19, 2018. The post turned into a thread, with *The DM* account being updated, first with a screenshot of the post, then with Vitter's statement, followed by the School of Journalism's statement, then Meek's apology, his apology retraction and finally, at 10:31 p.m., it revealed that a petition to remove Meek's name from the School of Journalism had received 580 signatures as of 10:30 p.m. The thread attracted a lot more interaction than the paper usually gets on social media. Whereas even a tweet linking a controversial article might get about 10 replies, the original tweet about Meek got 37, and the thread in total got 63.

The next morning, the September 20 edition of *The DM* gave its story on Meek its top billing. "Campus leaders condemn Meek's 'offensive' post," the headline read, with a picture of Meek right there on the front page. It is noteworthy that 'offensive' is the adjective quoted in the headline, and not 'racist,' or 'racial,' which was Vitter's own word of choice. That story is credited as a "*DM* Staff Report," with no one journalist in its byline. The article more or less reiterates what happened the night before, featuring additional statements from the Black Student Union and ASB president Elam Miller, who said Meek's "recent comments posted on social media…reflect both racism and sexism towards members of our community." The article does, surprisingly, include a quote in support of Meek. Nic Lott, the first African American ASB president in university history, posted the following to his social media: "Folks, I

spoke with my friend Ed Meek an hour ago. I've known Ed since my days at Ole Miss. Ed has helped a lot of people throughout his career, including myself. Those pictures should not have been posted, but it doesn't make him a racist. He loves Oxford and he loves Ole Miss…I believe he is just concerned about what took place."

The article, which would be the only one in that day's paper about Meek (the only opinion article that day was about Brett Kavanaugh), finished by citing the Meek School's "Guidelines for use of Social Media." "Faculty should always think before they post, be civil to others and their opinions and not post personal information about others unless they have their explicit permission," it reads.

The next day, with the Friday, September 21, *DM*, the floodgates opened. The one news story in the 12-page paper about Meek covered the forum that was held in Nutt auditorium. And while yes, it was a news story, its headline was in line with the rest of the paper: "Confronting Prejudice." *The DM*'s editors exhibited no caution in using such a headline, in calling Meek's post, if not Meek the man too, "prejudice(d)." The paper also features an editorial signed by the entire editorial staff, titled "Enough." The article reads:

> *The Daily Mississippian*, like the University of Mississippi, has not always stood against hate.
>
> We sometimes participated in upholding a vision of our campus and city that rested on outdated ideas about race and gender that some people in our community wish still existed. There are days when we didn't do the right thing.
>
> But today is not one of them.
>
> Today, we can look to those in our past who demonstrated the power student journalists have when they speak up for what is right.
>
> In 1962, editor-in-chief Sidna Brower wrote an editorial urging the community to come together in the wake of the riots following James Meredith's integration, causing her to be formally censored by the Associated Student Body Senate. In 2008, our staff penned

an editorial denouncing the men donned in white, black and red hoods who marched on our campus. In 2015, when the Associated Student Body prepared to vote to take down the Mississippi state flag flying high above the heart of campus, our staff spoke up in support of progress and respect. Today is no different.

The Daily Mississippian of today rejects our university's history of complicity and, instead, chooses to stand against hate.

That is why *The Daily Mississippian* staff is calling for the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning to rename the Meek School of Journalism and New Media and for the journalism school to entirely cut ties with former UM professor, assistant vice chancellor, donor and namesake of the school, Ed Meek.

His name and the division it has come to represent do not align with our values. This change is absolutely necessary to uphold everything we stand for — as journalists, as students, as individuals. Students should not have to attend a school whose name makes them feel discriminated against.

The 2018-19 editorial staff of *The Daily Mississippian* condemns the remarks made by Meek. We wholly denounce his tone and the sentiments he expressed. His post clearly demonstrated racist and sexist language and does not align with the values of our publication or those of the university we attend.

In his post, Meek said, "We all share in the responsibility to protect the values we hold dear." We do not, in fact, hold dear the same values Meek made clear in his post. The values he demonstrated are not those of *The Daily Mississippian*. They are not those of the School of Journalism. They are not those of Ole Miss.

As the University of Mississippi Creed says, "The University of Mississippi is a community of learning dedicated to nurturing excellence in intellectual inquiry and personal character in an open and diverse environment." The Creed encourages, as we do, respect for the dignity of each person as well as fairness and civility.

We, as student journalists, must fight against bigotry and prejudice. It is our duty to stand up to those who seek to further divide us or discriminate against our fellow students. We must uphold the value of the education we receive here from the University of Mississippi, and we must uphold the integrity of the practice of journalism.

It is time to stop ostracizing those who may not look or act like us. It is time to stand up for what we know to be right. It is time to move past the history that continues to plague our campus.

There is no better time than now.

Our community's culture has perpetuated and reinforced antiquated stereotypes about our university for too long. It is time for the slurs, the derision, the hatred to end.

> Meek devalued the integrity of those two black students for the color and visibility of their skin. In response, we need to embrace, welcome and celebrate the diversity of our university's community.
>
> Today, we believe this staff editorial solidifies our place on the right side of history — a history that is so painfully marred by mistakes we dare not repeat.
> History may repeat itself — but not here.
> Enough.

This article, with the weight of the entire editorial staff behind it, right down to the assistant news editors, leaves no mystery as to exactly where the paper stands on this particular issue. It calls for the Meek School to be renamed and for the school to cut all ties with Ed Meek. To me, this corrupts all of the paper's subsequent news coverage on the matter, because we as readers know exactly where it stands. How can the paper have the semblance of objectivity when it took a stance, and a very strong one at that, on a highly controversial issue for which it knew it would have to be doing extensive news reporting over a longer period of time? At the very least, *The DM* should have made sure that none of the signing editors of this article would be doing any coverage on Meek-related news, but as we will see later, that was not the case, either. In fact, in that very same issue, the "Confronting Prejudice" article was written by Blake Alsup, the paper's news editor, as he was attaching his name to an editorial that, by definition, gave him the outward appearance of bias, despite being a news reporter.

That day's paper also famously featured the "I don't need your apology" letter to the editor from Mahoghany Jordan, one of the two women in the photos that Meek shared. Her letter was scathing toward Meek. "Somehow for Meek, the blame for the university's enrollment decline and the city's decline in property value was easier to associate with two women of color as opposed to the particular demographic that has been at the forefront of the school's most controversial moments by far. The post reeks of racist ideology as well as misogyny and is not

representative of who either of (she and Kiyona Crawford) are…I relinquish being oversexualized, scapegoated and invalidated by anyone. I deserve to feel secure in my skin on this campus and in this town just as my counterparts do…"

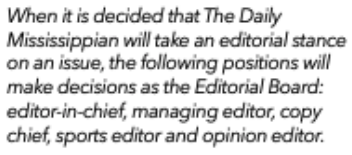
Including *The DM* staff editorial and Jordan's letter, there were seven different opinion pieces in that day's paper. All seven were negative against Ed Meek. For the first 6 *DM* editions following Meek's post, either he or a story about him, or the Meek School of Journalism, was featured on the front page of the paper. Over the course of the Fall 2018 semester, a Meek story was on the front page 12 times.

The third such paper in a row with a Meek story on its front was on Monday, September, 24. That was a general news story, credited to "*DM* Staff Report," and titled "Meek asks for name to be removed." Inside the paper was a letter from then-*DM*-editor-in-chief Slade Rand, which explained that the paper had been receiving such a high volume of letters and guest columns. Rand announces an "updated process for responding to authors of letters to the editor and guest columns." He insinuates that became of the high volume and the rapidly changing nature of the situation, some letters and columns had gone unpublished.

A timeline below his note shows the official responses to Meek's post, with a still photograph from the SOJNM video featuring Dean Norton front-and-center.

The September 26 edition features a front-page article stating that the university had decided to expedite the removal process of the Meek name from Farley Hall. The article was written by Taylor Vance, assistant news editor, who was part of that editorial staff that wrote the "Enough" article. As I pointed out, this is, in my opinion, a conflict that people are working on news coverage who outlined their stance on the issue. When I worked at *The DM*, it had a strict policy of not mixing-and-mingling news and opinion. If you were a news reporter, the answer

was definitely "no" as to whether you could ever, under any circumstance, write an opinion piece. Likewise, the "editorial board" that would sometimes write opinions, like the famous "Bullshit" piece about Chancellor Boyce excluded the news editor(s) and assistant news editor(s) (Editorial Board). That fact that it did so was disclosed in the paper.


When it is decided that The Daily Mississippian will take an editorial stance on an issue, the following positions will make decisions as the Editorial Board: editor-in-chief, managing editor, copy chief, sports editor and opinion editor.

The editorial disclaimer as it appeared in the October 4, 2019 edition of *The DM*, which contained the "Bullshit" piece by the Editorial Board.

But a day after the "Enough" column, "Journalism school leaders focus on 'business as usual'" appeared in bold on the front page, this time written by Slade Rand himself. By this point, in as many days, the paper had had two of its editors who had publicly taken a side on this issue having their names in bylines for news coverage. That article recounted how, after Meek's post, Dean Norton called him on the phone and at that point, was the last person affiliated with the school to talk to Meek. Knowing what we know now, it probably had something to do with Meek publishing Blake Tartt's photos, which it was later revealed they both had possession of.

While that article would be the only Meek-related news article in that day's paper, it featured four opinion articles, two of which were letters to the editor and two columns. One of the letters to the editor was the first opinion piece published by *The DM*, out of 11 (and out of 4 in that day's paper), that was supportive of Ed Meek. It came from controversial-but-successful Ole Miss alum and attorney Dickie Scruggs, who argued that, at a time when Chancellor Vitter was leading the effort to install contextualization plaques at campus spots named for troubled figures, most of them Southern White supremacists, somebody like Meek, "a man of otherwise extraordinary accomplishment and generosity – in recognition of which the School of Journalism bears his name," was certainly deserving of keeping the school named after him, even if it required a plaque to do so. "Those of us who know Ed Meek know that he is neither a racist nor

a misogynist. The body of his life's work contains nothing that would reasonably indicate a racial or misogynistic bent. Indeed, my first encounter with Meek was when he asked my help for an African-American church that he was financially assisting. Meek's errant posting was the product of late-septuagenarian ignorance of today's student attire rather than a racial animus. No less than the Confederate soldier and L.Q.C. Lamar, Ed Meek's mistake deserves to be contextualized with the many good things he's done for our community and university," Scruggs said in his letter.

Scrugg's letter stood above a letter from a former managing editor of *The DM* in 1983, the publishing of which can be viewed largely as self-serving due to its opening paragraph: "I'm impressed by the courage of *The DM* staff, the journalism faculty, and I am even more awed at the bravery of senior Mahoghany Jordan in calling out Meek for targeting her and her friend and fellow student in a racist social media post." I would argue that this opening only materializes the kind of selfish praise the editors of the paper wanted to confer upon themselves, ironically coming from a letter titled, "Administration must distance itself from bias." The bias here is, after complaining about not having enough room to publish all the supposedly great letters and columns being sent, wasting space in the paper with letters that praise yourself and the school faculty you agree with.

The September 28 edition does not feature a full news article about Meek or an opinion article on the subject, but rather a short blurb at the top of the front page prompting readers to go to thedmonline.com for a story that, after the Council of Academic Administrators voted to remove Meek's name from the School of Journalism, as did the Graduate and Undergraduate Councils, the proposal was headed to Chancellor Vitter to decide whether or not to make a

recommendation to the Institutions of Higher Learning Board of Trustees that a name change should take place.

The next coverage of Meek would come in the October 3 edition, with a spot on the front page: "Vitter yet to approve removal of Meek's name." While a news piece, it was critical of Vitter's five days of inactivity in not formally recommending to the IHL the removal of Meek's name. It was also written by Taylor Vance, marking another example of his covering of news after that "Enough" editorial.

By this point, into early October, the controversy began to die down a bit, as its headlines were no longer dominating *The DM* every day and opinion articles on the topic were not regularly featured. On October 8, *The DM* featured an opinion article and a news article, although both were anything but normal. The opinion piece was a letter to the editor, signed by 62 members of the faculty, "calling for reparative justice." The article commended the faculty of the SOJNM for calling for Meek to remove his name from the school, and it thanked Meek for asking that his name be withdrawn. It labeled Meek's post "racist" and "sexist," and said, "we must not simply condemn acts and symbols of hate on our campus but also build institutions which affirm our students and raise up historical struggles for justice." The letter argued that "Meek's comments expressed nostalgia for institutional racism and policies of racial exclusion," and that removal of his name is necessary but just a step in a process of reparative justice. It then issues demands of university leadership, that the School of Journalism and New Media be renamed after Ida B. Wells-Barnett, that the university establish resources and scholarships for Black women pursuing journalism degrees, and that a Reparative Justice Committee led by students and faculty begin the process of removing the Confederate monument. With this letter, we see for the first time that the fallout from Meek's post was seen as the catalyst for a

movement on campus to enact larger social change. And while I am not here to say if such social changes are right or wrong, I hold that the usage of the Meek controversy as a tool and weapon to make such change happen, especially if by journalists themselves, is to be condemned. The news "article" in that day's paper is more of just a graphic, titled "When will Vitter act?" By this point, Vitter had not taken any action in 11 days after all the required groups had concluded voting.

As for the notion that a larger movement was brewing around the Meek saga, and that *The DM*'s reporting was integral to it, the October 10 *DM* announced that a special edition would be forthcoming the next day. "In response to recent campus conversations regarding race, this Thursday's *DM* will take a closer look at discrimination within our university community." At that bottom of that day's paper was the story that Vitter had recommended the removal of Meek's name to the IHL. It was written by Taylor Vance. Another story mentions the Meek controversy. It is about how a relative of Ida B. Wells-Barnett publicly supported calls to name the School of Journalism and New Media after Wells-Barnett. That article was written by Slade Rand. It seems that not only did the paper's editors not try to avoid writing news stories about Meek after revealing their feelings against him in the September 21 editorial, they wrote *nearly all of them*. What kind of separation of opinion and news is this when the same people who made their opinion known, their dejection of Meek and their support for ties being cut permanently from the university, are covering hard news stories on him through a supposed lens of objectivity? It simply cannot be both ways. It is a serial undermining of ethical journalistic practice at work here with *The DM*'s fall 2018 Meek coverage.

On October 11, 2018, the special edition, "Beyond Flags, Beyond Statues, Beyond Plaques, Beyond Hate" was published, all 16-pages of it, and Meek was featured heavily. An

editorial, from *The DM*'s opinion and design editor, Ethel Mwedziwendira, talked about a lot of the issues with the histories of buildings and names on campus, and in her litany, mentioned Meek's comments as "offensive," and talked about the petition to honor Wells-Barnett. The article makes no disparaging comment against Meek himself. A column from Cami Macklin questioning "Are Traditions Really Worth It?" is more critical of Meek, sort of doing the adverse of what Meek was charged with doing. Those who saw Meek's post as racist said that he was insinuating that Black people were driving down the culture and property values in Oxford; Macklin said that his post is driving down enrollment among persons of color. "It is instances like (Meek's post) that continue to steer people of color away from the university and Oxford community," she said.

A long story, "Moving Forward from Meek," appeared in the special edition, with a byline shared by Slade Rand and Griffin Neal. The article focused on how the university should proceed after the controversy. "The university now sits at a pivotal juncture in its history. While a few keystrokes flowing from the hands of one 77-year-old Ole Miss alumnus may seem insignificant compared to race riots outside of the Lyceum or a noose placed around the James Meredith statue (by a former student and fraternity brother), the lasting effects within the community are not." The article cited increased student unity about issues regarding race to try to show that there is a mandate from the student body to enact change. The article outlined the UM Race Diary Project that described many cases of microaggressions on campus, as well as a petition circulating among professors to call on school leaders to take a closer look at issues on campus, including symbols.

The final story in the special edition was a news story that looked back on the Occupy the Lyceum event in 2016 that came on the heels of a Facebook post from a former student, one that,

because of its references to hanging rioters after the death of Keith Lamont Scott (an African-American man fatally shot by police that resulted in protests and riots), was also perceived as racist. While Meek is not the main focus of the story, it surmises that because of his statements, there may have been another Occupy the Lyceum event. One student who was quoted said that the only reason the Meek name changed passed through its process was because its "easy," and not the "elbow grease work."

Meek was back in *The DM*'s regular news coverage on October 18, as the IHL Board was planning to discuss removing his name at its meeting that day. The following day's paper featured a large picture of Chancellor Vitter and another university's president, with the headline "IHL approves removal of Meek's name. It was written, as had the article been the day before, by Vance once more, but at least this time, Hadley Hitson, who was not at the time on the editorial board, received co-credit. After all, after Vance had signed an editorial calling for Meek's name to be removed, it would not have been a good look at all for him to write solo the news showing that he and *The DM* editorial staff had gotten their wish.

Both columns in that day's paper are about Meek, one being in support of, the and other, not. In "Ed Meek is a true hero," Josh Baker wrote, "Ed Meek's name, the name "Ole Miss" and the now-former mascot of this great university are all our Arch of Titus. They're the things we curse but must clutch to remember the gifts they gave to the present. It is truly a tragedy when we cannot view the present or past with nuance – at a university of all places. Education is paramount here, yet no comparative lenses are used. Meek ignorantly and without care posted an inappropriate message with photographs on Facebook. His actions were rude, insensitive, and most of all, repulsive to a university trying to heal from a scarred past. That doesn't warrant a removal of the spectacular work he, or anyone in a similar situation, has done."

The opposing column asks, “Why glorify white supremacy on our campus?” It is a celebration of the IHL decision, which remarkably, happened just four weeks after Meek’s post. “Ed Meek’s comments directly opposed the values exuded in the UM Creed, and I agree that his name needs to go.” However, the columnist argued that if Meek’s name warranted being removed, then it was time to examine some of the other people with buildings in the university named after them, mentioning some of the most notorious White supremacists in Ole Miss’s history, such as James Vardaman. “Are Meek’s comments worse than (being a White supremacist)? Of course not.”

A third opinion piece in support of Meek appeared in the October 26 *Daily Mississippian* as a letter to the editor. Mickey C. Smith, who is an F.A.P. Barnard Distinguished Professor (Emeritus) of Pharmacy, said that Meek convinced everyone that Ole Miss “could and would be great.” Smith talked about Meek’s role as director of public relations: “With good public relations being extremely difficult to achieve, but vital to the future of the university, Meek was in a pivotal role. I can attest that Meek worked tirelessly in efforts to bring calm and reason to the conflicts, as did many, many Oxford citizens and university faculty. Many of his efforts, I can also attest, were quietly invisible, but nonetheless critical”

This pretty much wrapped up *The DM*’s coverage of Ed Meek in the Fall 2018 semester. Interestingly, one letter to the editor that did not make it into any print edition of *The Daily Mississippian* that term (but was published online) was also probably the staunchest defense of Ed Meek. Sidna Brower Mitchell, who had served as editor of *The Daily Mississippian* during the 1962 enrollment of James Meredith, said “I am flabbergasted by the ‘outrage’ about Ed Meek’s post on Facebook. Folks keep repeating that Ed’s post, statement and comments had ‘clear racial undertones,’ ‘reeks of racist ideology as well as misogyny’ and were ‘racially

discriminatory.' Where are those so-called offensive, racist comments? Perhaps he should not have posted the pictures, but do the photos of Black females make the comments in the post racist? Did those critics really read Ed's words or were they simply mimicking what they thought was politically correct for the moment? People are so easily offended these days. Maybe they should have been around back in 1962-1963. James Meredith and I, plus a handful of other students could tell them about being ostracized, threatened, demonstrated against, spit upon, censured, stalked, etc. and believe me, the color of our skin didn't matter. Meredith paved the way for an open university that unfortunately has reached the absurd thanks to the chancellor, some deans, some professors and some students. I question people asking for Ed and Becky Meek's name being removed from the journalism building. This is a wonderful facility thanks to the $5.3 million given by the couple along with almost endless donations, including anonymous ones helping Black students…Where are level heads?"

Another opinion article not published in print but only online said that "to make the claim that Meek's post 'clearly demonstrated racist' language is total speculation, and to call for his reputation to be soiled based on this assumption is immoral. For the claim to be true, you actually have to prove that it was racist, or that he is racist. Chancellor Vitter, nor anyone, has done this…" (Meredith).

At the conclusion of the Fall 2018 semester, there had been a total of 16 opinion articles about Meek published in print in *The Daily Mississippian* (editorials, columns, letters). Of these, three were supportive of or positive toward Meek. The remaining 13 were negative. Further, 13 news articles about Meek had appeared. (For me to identify a story with Meek, he had to be the main focus or one of the main focuses.) What does this say that *The DM* ran 16 pieces of opinion about Meek but only 13 articles of news coverage? And that 81 percent of the opinion

pieces were negative against Meek? Sure, the public reaction to Meek's post probably leaned towards dissent and/or outrage, but while I cannot know for certain, I would wager than over 19 percent of the letters and columns *The DM* received on the matter were positive about Meek, but, of course, the paper retains the editorial independence to push the ones it sees fit.

As the university moved into the Spring 2019 semester, this transition of the incident of Meek's post and his name removed from Farley Hall to a larger culture clash on the Ole Miss campus began to take root. The front page of the November 29, 2018, *DM*, just before winter break, is consumed by student protestors demanding the removal of the statue of a Confederate soldier from the Circle.

A silent march in February 2019 against the Confederate monument, followed by that weekend, when neo-Confederates came to campus and spurred the men's basketball to kneel during the National Anthem, all led a beginning of what would be a transition year. By April, the idea that the Meek saga had set off a movement had come into the mainstream. In the April 10, 2019, *DM*, the paper featured a teaser for a special edition coming out the next day that read, "The Journalism School's name changed. Our chancellor resigned. Protestors marched, athletes kneeled, and students voted. And it all started six months ago."

Courtesy of the Daily Mississippian.

What arrived the next day was "The Ole Miss Pendulum," a 12-page special edition that gives credit to the Meek controversy for setting all of these other things off.

One of the articles in that special edition, "What was Ed Meek thinking?" quoted some of those who worked with Meek and knew him best to try and get a sense of what had set off his post. Overby Fellow Curtis Wilkie, who retired in December 2020, warned Meek that he was spending too much time at the Beacon, the institutional diner in Oxford, a place where the archetypal angry old men gather to talk about problems. "I said to Ed, 'Part of the problem is you spend too much of your time listening to a bunch of malcontents who think Ole Miss and Oxford are going to hell in a handbasket.'" Callie Bryant, who was an editor at *HottyToddy.com*, and who died in a car crash in 2020, said that while she wouldn't say Meek is a racist, she decried his reactionary tendencies. "He is a reactionary, first and foremost, and perhaps the very definition of him. He liked to be the first to say something. Perhaps he saw that extreme stories got extreme reactions. A(n internet) click is a click."

Dickie Scruggs, who had earlier written a letter to *The DM* editor in defense of Meek, defended him again. "It was more of a generational mistake than a racial mistake. I think Ed would have put the same picture if it would have been two White girls dressed like that." In private, according to friends and colleagues, Meek was astonished that his post was perceived as racist.

Every article in the "Pendulum" edition mentioned Meek by name, but the other article that is focused on him reveals a not-so-finalized divorced between him and the university. For one, *HottyToddy.com*, which is the online media company that Meek founded in 2012, became property of the university just 10 days before Meek's Facebook post in 2018. But Meek still has the power to revoke the trust under which the university operates the site, if the university failed

to follow what was agreed upon in the trust. No action has been taken to date to revoke the trust. Meek's other remaining connection to the university was through his graphene activities, with the National Graphene Association, which he started, and the Center for Graphene Research and Innovation at the university. However, the NGA website seems to be no longer active, and neither does the graphene research center.

Again, as for the idea of Meek's Facebook post as being the catalyst for so much else afterwards, the titular article of "The Ole Miss Pendulum" supports that. "That's not to say this change hasn't been bubbling under the surface for years – it has – but the waves have crested this year, the energy has crescendoed, and this came after a notoriously offensive Facebook post from September that received national attention." While I cannot say for certain, as I am not them, whether or not the folks at *The DM* intended to use its platform to help launch such a movement, it is certainly a possibility, given what I have identified, at least in my opinion, a pretty clear conflation of the line between news reporting and opinion, when you are allowing those in your organization who have publicly expressed their opinion matter-of-factly to continue to cover news like a regular journalist. And after all, they made the web address for "Pendulum," thedmonline.com/the-catalyst.

Chapter 5 The Last Chair Speaks Out

On October 13, 2020, I sat down for an interview with Samir Husni that lasted some 47 minutes. Husni, affectionately known as Mr. Magazine, a title which he has trademarked for himself, is introduced at length on Pages 21-27 of this document, for his role within the history of the School of Journalism. Before the department's organization into a school, Husni served as interim chair of the Department of Journalism from 1990-91, 1994-96 and from 2004-2005, before being elevated to chair in 2009. Ronald Farrar, who served as chair from 1973-1977 and who authored the book *Powerhouse: The Meek School at Ole Miss*, which Chapter 1 of this thesis is largely based, portrays the transition from department to school, and the transition from Chair Husni to Dean Norton as a smooth one. According to the book, Husni was considered for the deanship, but administration feared that making him dean would remove him from the classroom, where it felt that Husni could be more impactful as a professor and leader of the school's magazine ventures.

Husni, however, recalls things in a different way. He says that as chair, the discussions with Meek for him to become the namesake were kept private from him, and that while he was involved in the official paperwork to transition to a school, the process was largely kept detached from him. His sentiment seems to reveal a feeling of hurt and betrayal at being excluded, despite his reservations at becoming a school in the first place:

> "When I was chair of the department of journalism in '09, I submitted to the IHL the forms that were required for us to become a 'school of journalism.' And my papers that I

submitted under my signature that went to the provost's office, were to establish a 'school of journalism.' That was the name. There was no 'Meek' attached to the name. There was no 'new media' attached to the name, because I'm a firm believer that journalism is new media every day…Now how did the name end up with the school, I have no earthly idea. I was never, never privy to those discussions. I mean, actually, I was not even, as chair of the department, I was not privy on some of the discussions that were taking place. And that's what I told the faculty, I said, 'if somebody wants to feel like they were hurt…you're looking at the person…I had nothing to do with having Ed Meek on the name of the school…I probably was one of the few who were against even becoming a school…My questioning for the administration back then is like, 'Four or 5 million (dollars), for 5 million dollars. I mean, you are selling us off, because who's going to give us any more money. If you are naming a school for 5 million (dollars), or if you are becoming a school, that's one reason I stepped down as Chair, I mean, I didn't want anything to do with it, and started the Magazine Innovation Center, which is the best decision I've made in my life."

Editorial Note: In some of Husni's following quotes regarding The Daily Mississippian, he often uses the pronoun "we," which might insinuate some direct involvement with the paper. Husni is not directly involved with the paper in any way, but rather, was using the pronoun as a means to hypothetically view these situations from the editors' perspectives.

Common Ground

After the Meek controversy, the School of Journalism and New Media established the "Common Ground Committee," which was formed to make official recommendations to the school on how to move forward. However, a *DM* article in April 2019 called attention to the fact that the committee had "yet to release its official recommendations, opting instead to host community events to reinforce the idea that hearing all opinions on sensitive matters is important" (Ballowe). Husni, who is quoted in that article in support of the committee, walked away from it prior to the publishing of the article, and is quoted as a "former member" (Ballowe). In our interview, he criticized the committee in no uncertain terms. "I did not feel that students should be on that committee," Husni said. He felt that if the committee was to work toward bettering student life in the School of Journalism, then it would be improper for students to be involved.

Husni also disagreed with what he saw as a misguided focus in the committee. "I felt like after the meetings, the students who were on the committee were going into so many tangents. I wanted to focus on reconciliation…The ultimate goal of the committee was to find new common grounds. And then all of a sudden, the issues in those meetings, and some of the students that (were) presented on that committee. I mean, all of a sudden, they wanted to bring Native American issues, they wanted to bring all the minorities, they wanted to start bringing, like speakers from all walks, and "(I) said, 'let's do what we have, let's reconcile among each other first, before we reach out, before we start, like, you know, worrying about the indigenous Americans and this and this."

The committee was also allowing for a major conflict to exist, in that practicing student journalists were being allowed to sit on the committee. "When you have people on that

committee who are, on one hand, working journalists, you cannot be acting as a journalist and as a committee member at the same time, and then go and report what happened in the committee. I mean, I'm all for freedom of the press, and transparency and you name it. But when you are sitting in a meeting, and you are dealing with sensitive topics like that, and feeling that every single word you are going to say can be taken out of context and published…" Serving on the committee only reinforced for Husni that being a journalist and issuing public statements ought to be mutually exclusive acts. "I've never as a journalist, never believed in issuing statements. I mean, I believe that journalists should never be in the business of issuing statements or giving their opinions. I tell everybody who's willing to listen that when a journalist gives his or her opinion, he or she is no longer a journalist…I decided, that's just not for me, I'm more of an action person…I felt like we were going to be dragging in and having one meeting after the other. And, in order for us to come up with some kind of a statement that at the end of the day will end up like all committee reports, in some drawer with nobody paying attention."

Defense of Meek

Although Husni was definitely no fan of Meek's name being on Farley Hall in the first place, he told me that in the faculty discussions about removing Meek's name, Husni decried the notion of placing the blame of Mississippi's historical and ongoing issues on one man. "One of the things I mentioned in those meetings is let's not, I mean, you're talking to a person who probably (has) suffered from race issues in my 37 years in Mississippi, but I was always able to divert those issues, and use them as energy and fuel to help me focus on my mission, which is education…So, I mentioned in that faculty meeting, 'let's be clear about one thing, let's not put all the ills of the State of Mississippi and all the racist issues that took place in the State of Mississippi, historically speaking until now, on one person, namely Ed Meek. Right or wrong,

Ed Meek Should not be blamed on the Confederate statue, on the Confederate flag.' So it was like, we were reaching a stage where the two extremes were taking place and how can you have any reconciliation if you are taking one of the two extremes? ...I'm not going to blame Ed Meek for all the ills of the State of Mississippi, it's as simple as that."

The Common Ground Committee did not talk about Meek, Husni said. While he did not explicitly tell me his personal feelings on whether or not Meek's name should have been removed, he did say that his feelings on the matter had no bearing whatsoever on his decision to exit the committee.

Cultural Shift

Like many others have, Husni framed Meek's post and the fallout within the context of some larger movement. He discussed some of the changes happening in journalism and in society in 2020, as a result of the George Floyd killing. But first, he sharply criticized Meek's Facebook post.

> "I believe that when God or some higher power tells you, 'hesitate," it's a good time to stop. But when you tell me that I hesitated before I posted this thing, and yet I posted it. To me, it's like double jeopardy…The depiction of those two Black students was unacceptable under any shape or form…God knows how many White students I've seen in the same state of drunkenness, clotheslessness," Husni said. "And I think it's the combination of the pictures and the words that ignited the response from the chancellor and the response from the school…A lot of people try to separate all the pictures, if the pictures were not there. Well, that's a big *if*. Because, a lot of people may have agreed

with the content of the Facebook posts, but not to the pictures. But you cannot isolate…it's all a package."

He shifted into talking about 2020 and some of those journalistic changes that the summer's upheaval brought about. "As one editor said, from a British magazine, maybe there's something good about 2020 and this Coronavirus, because it's forcing people to be isolated, to be alone, to have time to reflect and think. And the killing of George Floyd, you know, happened at a time we're all isolated…We had no distraction," Husni said. "So, it's awakening the sense of people that, you know, maybe we've ignored 400 years of history, and maybe we were never the diverse country that we are, which is a collective of minorities, rather than a majority of White and a minority of Black, and Blacks were mistreated and you name it…Forbes yesterday announced they're not going to use the term minority anymore. They will never refer to any person now by the color of their skin…that was a wakeup call."

The Myth of Objectivity in Evaluating *The DM*'s Coverage

I, and many others, felt that *The Daily Mississippian* did not objectively cover the Meek saga, given its editorial on September 21, 2018, its repeated publishing of Meek's detractors in its columns and the two special editions it published that were highly critical of Meek (and that credited him with starting a cultural movement on the UM campus).

One thing that I failed to consider, and a point that both Husni and Baidya bring up, is that maybe, even if *The DM* had bias, that is okay. What I mean by this is the idea of journalistic objectivity as either a myth or an outright lie, and the shift of outlets across the country away from claiming to be objective and toward simply claiming to be fair and transparent.

"People forget that this whole concept of objectivity in journalism is a concept that was created mainly to appease the advertisers. Journalism always had an opinion angle. When the first newspapers were started, they were as partisan as can be." Husni did say that in evaluating claims that *The DM* was not objective or fair to Meek, he thinks it is still possible to completely separate what was published as an opinion versus what was a news story.

> "It's so hard for (people) to differentiate between what's an opinion, and what's a news story. They could not differentiate that someone somebody wrote a column, or if somebody wrote a news story, between the two…I think they did an excellent job in terms of covering and being on the two sides of journalism, with the understanding that I may not agree with all the opinion writers, but I mean, this is life…If there's two sides, then you present two sides…If somebody voices an opinion from the right, okay, we have somebody to voice an opinion on the left," Husni said. He argued that in the general news coverage of some of the basic events that happened, there are not two sides to tell. "But what two sides are for the story when they say, 'the School of Journalism voted to recommend the removal of the name,' or this or that," Husni said. "I don't think it was up to the faculty to decide to remove the name or not…it's like saying it was not up to the faculty to decide what the name of the school is…I think *The Daily Mississippian,* covering what the faculty voted or what the Provost recommended, or what the IHL voted, I think they did a great job in following the coverage. I think most of the criticism that comes to *The Daily Mississippian* comes from the opinion writers, comes sometimes from the way you write the headline…"

Proximity, in large part, affected the students' coverage of the Ed Meek fallout, Husni said. "There's an inherent bias, because the editors and most of the folks working at *The Daily*

Mississippian are journalism students. So, proximity becomes an issue. I mean, do we find in (*The DM*) articles about students in the accountancy school winning wards, yet anytime our students win awards, you'll find it in (*The DM*)" Husni said. "It was a very tough issue for *The DM*…because we're not covering a positive thing. We're covering a negative thing. And how can we do it without burning our toes and burning our fingers? I mean, it was a big challenge."

Community News and Hard News

In further evaluating *The Daily Mississippian*'s coverage, we discussed the difference between the newspaper and magazines and the difference between community news and what is generally referred to as "hard news." In response to my question as to whether student media is too negative or too critical of school controversy, Husni replied, "It is, because that's the role of the newspaper…We've always said, 'you want positive news, pick up a magazine…you want to know what bad is happening in the world, pick up a newspaper.' So, inherited in the newspaper is that negativity…One of the funniest things I tell people all the time, the definition of journalism in Arabic is 'the profession looking for trouble.' That's how we define journalism…If you have way too many friends, then you're doing something wrong. It's as simple as that."

I asked Husni to distinguish *The DM* from *HottyToddy*, because many in the university community prefer the latter and cite its much less critical coverage of the university and of Oxford as the reason. "Community journalism, in the good old days when we had daily papers almost in every single town, was more of the 'refrigerator journalism.' This is the journalism where people just want, 'and Susie came to Sunday school, and she brought her famous pecan pie,' so you can cut that picture of Aunt Susie with the pecan pie and you put it on the fridge,"

Husni explained. It's still that sense of community journalism (with *HottyToddy*), let's focus on the positive, uplifting thing – it's more of a magazine style."

Less Visibility Means Less Power

One of my original hypotheses when thinking of the topic for this thesis was, "Did *The Daily Mississippian*, and does media in general, have a role in shaping public opinion?" Husni's answer was pretty critical of *The DM*. He said that while yes, historically *The DM* is a tour de force on campus in terms of wielding influence, that influence is shrinking rapidly as the paper moved from a daily, to four days a week, to three and now down to one.

> "I think they used to have much more power in shaping the opinion, when they were published daily, when they were in your face…Out of sight, out of mind. When students used to walk in and see all these hallways filled with *The Daily Mississippian*s, the printed thing, when I used to teach in the auditorium upstairs and the janitors had to clean the auditorium from all these newspapers. It has much more influence than just getting an email in the morning or going to go online…When I go online and look, I think you can count maybe less than 50 people who are continuously criticizing *The DM*. So, that influence is still within this limited circle…The remaining 14 to 15 thousand students on campus don't give a hoot," Husni said.

Husni argued that this is not only representative of student media, but of journalism as a whole. Without print media in the hands of the reader, the connection to the reader and overall exposure suffer. If *The DM* is going to not only survive, but thrive, its content and attitude must change from that of a daily to that of a weekly. "The daily paper must look and feel like a weekly but published on a daily basis…revamp and make it a weekly and call it the

Mississippian, so people will know that times are changing, rather than (trying) to keep your foot in the past," Husni said.

A Divided Media Landscape Distorts Reality

Husni spoke of the industry-wide decline, and how it has been a gradual thing, with the advent of cable news, and then the internet. Journalism is dead, he said, but that does not mean he cannot hope for an afterlife. "Journalism started dying in this country in 1980, when a cable news network called *CNN,* not because of *CNN,* but because we took news from a 22-minute cycle to a 24-hour cycle. And then with the internet and social media, journalism died. Social media put the last nail of the coffin on journalism. I'm hoping (for) life after death, that we will have journalism back again," Husni said. He attributed the way the media landscape has become so toxic, so political, so vitriolic – to its decline. "President Trump can appoint Jesus Christ to the Supreme Court. And you are going to find some media people and some journalists criticizing that decision, that there's something wrong with Jesus Christ to be on the Supreme Court. Journalism has declined to the lowest."

Husni raised another point here that would be revisited in my interview with Baidya, which is the idea of competing views of reality and the notion that different media outlets are projecting entirely different worldviews. Husni said, "When I first came to this country in 1978, Walter Cronkite was the most trusted man in America. He delivered the news 22 minutes a day, told us what happened. He did not have any talking heads coming on his show or telling you this or that and asking opinion. It was just, 'this is what happened today,' in 22 minutes. Can you name a single journalist today who has a higher trust than a used car salesman? It's sad and comical at the same time, that when you're watching the news, and the anchor tells you, 'President Trump said this, this, this, but he lied. And we know he's lying, because he's always

lying.' What type of news is this? It's like we're no longer focused on delivering that. Leave it up to the people to make up their mind. Don't try to feed the fire. Now we are living, I wish we were only living in two different countries. God knows how many countries we are living in. Every television channel, you flip, you think you are living in a different country. If everyone thinks they are a journalist, then nobody is a journalist, when you have from the President of the United States to my grandson, who can tweet 140 characters and think they are good at delivering information and content for you." Husni reiterated more than once his belief that journalism is dead, that it has declined and his disdain for what it has become.

On Cancel Culture

Another hypothesis I began this thesis with was, "Was Ed Meek a victim of Cancel Culture?" And so, I asked Husni about it. I also spoke at great length about the topic with Corey Liberman, an expert in communications theory, in another interview, which is covered in the following chapter. Husni does not see Ed Meek as having been taken down by cancel culture, but he does see cancel culture itself as a real threat to our society.

> "I think what happened to Ed Meek was a result of a big mistake that he did, and as a result of people in this day and age who don't know how to say, 'I'm sorry, I messed up. Please forgive me.' Those three sentences would have ended that whole issue right there and then. We've become a nation where nobody apologies for anything, wrong or right… (Meek's apology) was not an apology…All what he should have said, 'I'm sorry, I messed up, I should not have put this. Please forgive me.' And delete the whole thing and just – who among us did not do mistakes and with this social media world, with this, no filtering, nothing. And with your conscious telling you, 'I hesitated before I do that.' Heck, the minute I hesitate of doing anything, I don't do it," Husni said.

While Husni said that what happened to Meek was a result of an inadequate apology, I did want to use the dictionary definition of "cancel culture" and just raise the possibility that it could apply. Merriam-Webster says, "To cancel someone (usually a celebrity or other well-known figure) means to stop giving support to that person. (It has) to do with the removing of support for public figures in response to their objectionable behavior or opinions. This can include boycotts or refusal to promote their work" ("What It Means"). Being "cancelled" is something that has become very politicized, but I argue that in this case, the Meek situation checks the basic boxes for being a cancellation. Meek, a wealthy donor and well-known figure in the community of Oxford, made an objectionable post with a controversial opinion on social media, and as a result, the university stopped supporting him by removing his name from the School of Journalism and by cutting ties with him. Even here in the Ole Miss community, we have become an unforgiving culture and incapable of the reconciliation that Husni spoke of.

On the general idea of cancel culture, Husni's opinions were strong in rebuke of it. "There are two schools of thought on that," he said. "One is let's cancel all the previous country culture and pretend it never happened. Two, let's look at the culture of the past, see the failures and see what we can learn from it and move forward. Nobody can cancel history…no matter how much we hide from it and how much we pretend that it did not happen…Cancel culture is so dangerous because, to me, it takes away from the images and the records that help us study what happened, move forward, learn from the mistake, learn from the errors…Where do you stop? If I don't agree with you, I'm going to cancel (you)…We are a country made of immigrants from all over the world. We, at one stage, became a melting pot. Now, we are more like a cafeteria, where everybody can pick and choose. And when you have a cafeteria, you can take one dish,

and nobody will know it was ever there. But when you have a melting pot, all the ingredients are so important."

Chapter 6 An Expert on Communications Theory

Communications Theory uses a varied approach to holistically study the fundamentals of media and its place in society. Liberman specifically studies how individuals use communications in order to produce desired outcomes. His areas of expertise include risk and crisis communication, nonverbal communication, public relations and strategic communication and persuasion, viewing all of these through the lens of interpersonal, group, health, political and instructional settings. Liberman is a professor at Marymount Manhattan College in New York City and has written six textbooks, in addition to dozens of studies and scholarly journals. I spoke with him over the telephone on November 6, 2020, to try to apply his knowledge on communications theory to the Ed Meek situation, which he self-researched ahead of our call.

What is Communications Theory

According to Liberman, the field of communications theory is made up of over 40 theories that have been developed by communications theorists. A lot of the ideas have been derived from psychology, sociology, anthropology and the social sciences. The theories are developed to do three things: describe what, explain why and predict when, and are also viewed through approaches such as interpersonal communication, group communication, organizational communication and mediated communication (which refers to the use of information technology and would refer to the type of communication exhibited by Meek and Vitter).

The theories try to explain "what seems to work, why it seems to work and when it seems to work." Basically, how does one communicate, in a multitude of situations, to ascertain the desired reaction or outcome? Liberman describes it as "an effort to better understand the human social condition and the link between message design, message framing, message discourse and message outreach in terms of answering those three questions – what, why and when, by using description, explanation and prediction.

Much of Liberman's work, he says, has been focused on public relations, and specifically within that, persuasion. He has studied the role of strategic message design in getting people to change and/or to create or shape attitude. Liberman has authored a case book containing different studies examining the role of communications theory in the everyday world. For example, he says, a waiter can increase his or her likelihood of securing a better tip by certain nonverbal acts. Liberman says that his studies have shown to be highly reliable, and that when he puts them to the test, he routinely finds that he gets the same results.

Conflict

Given that Meek's post generated conflict, among himself and others and among those in the Ole Miss community who had discourse in terms of how to proceed, I asked Liberman how might his studies tell us about public conflict, that is, conflict exhibited in a public setting.

He said that generally it is assumed that conflict avoidance is a good idea, but that in the 1990s, researchers at West Virginia University argued that conflict is actually a good thing. More specifically, interacting in conflict and dialoging about conflict were found to be better than conflict avoidance. There are two variables linked to conflict, according to Liberman. They are, verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness. He said that while these may sound like bad

things, they are not in their own rights. It is when they are mixed with a high level of assertiveness that they become problematic.

Conflict is good, because it allows for quality decision-making, as opposed to a pack mindset that makes people a victim to social influence. When someone disagrees with someone else, instead of "fall(ing) prey" to their thinking, the two should rather engage in effective discourse, so that a better idea may result.

Public Figures and the Media

One of the big debates in this Ed Meek case is about the level of scrutiny warranted to statements made by people like Ed Meek. While Meek is generally regarded as a public figure, in that he worked in public relations at the university and was often featured in media about the university, in addition to retaining a generally public life with his business endeavors, some have argued that, as a private citizen and as a private donor, Meek's statements should not have been amplified like they were, but rather treated like those of any average Joe's Facebook account. Surely, people who are not famous say much worse, very bigoted things every day on Facebook, and because they do not have any kind of status, those words do not face public scrutiny, usually. So, what does this say for Meek, or for any other university donor who fails to resist the urge to post something they should not?

Liberman argues that the lines are becoming even more blurred between who is a public figure and who is not, in the age of social media. "We can argue that just by being on Facebook, you are a public figure," he said. "Having exposure on social media platforms produces the very nature of being a public speaker." He argued that with the lines blurred between the expectations of a public figure and private citizen, it is more important now than ever to act with care online

and take ownership of any statements and actions. "We have to remember to take onus over the messages that we are sending, whether we are private figures or whether we are pubic figures…because you are Google-able, you become a public figure."

Liberman said that yes, Ed Meek is a public figure. Why? "Let's assume that you or I said something incriminating about our institution, and linked it, especially in 2020, to issues linked to racism, inclusivity, diversity – you and I would then become public figures. We as a result of our statements become public figures. It used to be, without social media, that we would have to become a public figure by doing something to put us in the eye of the public…Somebody like this gentleman (Meek) is somebody that yes, is a public figure and somebody whose statements we need to take as seriously as somebody who would be considered a 'celebrity,' 'political figure' or 'economic figure…' Public figures have to recognize that they are considered to be reputable, and they are considered to be credible, and that people know them. And they have to be wary of the statements that they make…are putting (them) at risk for social ostracism, linking that to cancel culture," Liberman said.

The Media and Public Opinion

"I think that the media are hugely, hugely important in shaping public opinion," Liberman said. He referred back to the "agenda-setting theory" which was developed in a study in 1968 and published in 1972. The theory claims that the news media has the ability to influence the public agenda and manipulate public awareness of pertinent issues. In summation, the theory does not state that the media tells us what to think, but it does tell us what to think about.

Liberman supported the theory with an independent study he did in college on the organization known as the World Trade Organization (WTO). The group was targeted by a number of social protests happening in Seattle, and the study found that before the internet and social media, how did newspapers and radio shape public opinion? In this case, they did it by reporting very little on what the protests were about, focusing instead on how those involved in them were breaking societal norms. By doing this, political leaders were implanted with perceptions about the protestors themselves, rather than the issues they were protesting about. He calls this, too, "message-framing tactics," that can be used by different organizations to draw the kind of reaction they want, i.e. *Fox News* vs. *NBC*.

A Reactionary Public, Social Media and Cancel Culture

I came into my thesis research with the belief that *The Daily Mississippian* had engaged in these kinds of message-framing tactics. At the very least, I think it reported with a basic underlying message of "Meek is bad," and that, for obvious reasons, set the tone of its coverage. Therefore, I asked Liberman how the media tends to report on and create the perception about inflammatory comments that are viewed as racial or bigoted.

Liberman said that the relationship between the media and the perceptions of these things is certainly causal. In an age where social justice initiatives abound, he said, which are grappling with issues surrounding racism and diversity, media exposure and media coverage both shape and create public opinion. "There's a bi-reciprocal relationship here, where it's kind of like our attitudes are produced on media, especially with the introduction of our mass ability to go online and post things. But also, those very postings are then shaped and recreated by the media outlets that cover them," he said. The public reactions to these things are now given media coverage, too. This kind of symbiotic relationship has launched its own subject, called media ecology,

with folks studying these very relationships between press, social media and public. I would argue that we saw elements of all of these things from the Meek controversy, from Ed Meek's original post that generated hundreds of reactions and comments on Facebook, as did the chancellor's, which was followed by the reactions that *The DM* received when it began to follow the story on Twitter. And these things in turn affected the kinds of stories we saw in the paper and at its website. "Media ecologists…would argue that…media outlets purposefully alter (public perceptions or public reactions) and try to create a change in discourse and dialogue, especially if they see a best fit for their viewers and from their vantage point," Liberman said.

I asked Liberman if he would say that there is something inherent about social media that triggers both the inflammatory statements from public figures and the vitriolic reactions to those statements on social media. His answer: "ease of access." People are inclined to say stupid and irresponsible things, and with social media, it is just too easy for them to say those same stupid and irresponsible things for the world to hear or read. As a result of this, actually, his university is adding a course called "media literacy" that will basically teach social media users to be responsible for everything that they post. Aside from the ease that he mentioned, he also said the human disconnect that social media allows for gives license to people who just want discord. "(Some) want this inflammation to become inflammatory. They want it to be the source of dissent and disagreement…The things that happen over email, over social media platforms, are so amazingly disconnected from that that is going to happen face-to-face…because we're never going to really see these people," he said.

The solution? Well, that makes for a whole other thesis topic, Liberman said. Like most people say on this topic, we need more civility. The problem is, no one knows how to get there in a world with so much polarity and dissension. One solution he offered is that social media

platforms, the "Big Three" (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), put regulations on their platforms. No, he does not mean regulations restricting speech, but rather restricting topic. He said that, as a father of two children who are already active on social media, they are already being exposed to ideas that are political, moral and ethical, and he would just rather that not be the case. He said that this is just one factor contributing to the state of unrest and unrule that seems to be emanating from social media constantly.

How cancel culture fits in to the picture is not that the idea of canceling someone is a new idea (although the term "cancel culture" is), it is that social media has made it so much more prevalent. "We think about 20 years ago, we didn't have access to become a media producer, a media editor, a media disseminator. But now with our ability to not only post but to respond, we have an opportunity of adopting the seeds of those in the media industries, so to say." It is the removal of traditional media as the "gatekeeper," and the power being placed into the hands of everyone, with digital keys, that has proliferated this problem. In the late 20th century, when traditional media (radio, TV, newspaper, magazine) was at its peak, figures in the world of politics, business and sports were publicly ostracized and shunned because of actions they made, scandals they had, etc. But what has made it so frightening now is that it can happen to any ordinary person on social media, regardless of the person's status or the actual severity of his or her offense. Too, it is easy is for people to misunderstand and misread both the actual words and the intentions of the sender. This is true with Meek's post. None of us can ever know with certainty if Meek's intentions were racist, but the public's understanding of those words has come to largely be defined by a racial element. "I would argue it's (cancel culture) a dangerous thing, but I don't think it's any more dangerous as it was earlier. I think that it's just more likely

and it probably has more implications, because so many more people are exposed to it as compared to years and decades past," Liberman said.

Specifically, regarding Ed Meek, Liberman said this:

> "If we go back to the example that you had given me of Ed Meek, who was the Ole Miss donor, those women and the administrators at Ole Miss, they are getting as much media exposure as this donor was whose name is no longer now linked to the journalism program at Ole Miss. And I don't think that that is a good thing, right? That's probably something that is desired by some, some people will want to engage in the social ostracism, ostracizing of other people just to get their name linked to this. I think that's where the danger resides."

Evaluating the Meek 'Apology'

Given Liberman's specific expertise on crisis communication, I asked him to evaluate what Meek actually said, what he should have said and how the university's response compares. Liberman launched into applying "image restoration theory," which was developed by scholar William Benoit, to the situation.

Liberman also stressed that his situation was definitely a crisis. The strategies involved in the image restoration theory are: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action and mortification. He outlined what they each mean: "Denial is basically saying that nothing happened, it wasn't my fault, or it was somebody else's fault. Evading responsibility is basically, we are trying to evade the responsibility all together. You know, maybe it happened, but I have an excuse for why it happened. Corrective action is basically saying, look, it was my fault, but I want to do something in order to correct the problem. And

then mortification is the idea that I am completely admitting responsibility. I'm asking for your forgiveness." What Ed Meek did in his initial apology, the one that he deleted, would be categorized as "reducing offensiveness," specifically through the idea of transcendence, which is when, according to Benoit, "The Act is placed in a broad context to place it in a different, less offensive frame of reference." Liberman said, "He wasn't saying 'I didn't do anything,' what he was doing is, he was basically shifting the blame. He was saying to himself, a lot of it was in a broader context."

In evaluating the Ole Miss response, Liberman looked at the statement released by the School of Journalism and signed by the four deans. He said that this utilized the "situational crisis communication theory," which was produced by Timothy Coombs. What Ole Miss did was "bolster," which involves using the "reminder tactic," which is to tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization, "ingratiation," which is where the crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good work by the organization, and "victimage," by which crisis managers remind the stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis, too. "(The deans) are saying, 'look, we played no role in what this gentleman did or said, and we are not linked to him, we are going to (consider) taking his name off of the building," Liberman said. He argues that what Meek did was an ineffective crisis response and crisis management strategy, and that it probably did more harm than good, because his apology was inadequate and not directly at the two specific women. What Ole Miss did was effective, because it was timely and aligned with the situational crisis communication theory, which is effective over 95 percent of the time based on empirical data. "I think that in some ways, a public response to recreate a damaged image can be effective, like the Ole Miss reaction, but I also think that it can be

misleading, misconstrued and ultimately more problematic, as I think was manifested by the public reaction and public response by Meek himself," Liberman said.

Liberman concludes that Meek's apology was not an apology at all. "In reading it over 5, 6, 7 times," Liberman said, "I didn't really see anything apologetic about it." This concurs with Husni's evaluation that it was not really an apology at all. Meek did not acknowledge any of the reasons he was purporting to be apologizing, other than saying his original message was misconstrued. Liberman said that crisis communication is really about damage control, but Meek "didn't know who he damaged, why he damaged them and what the lasting effects were going to be. I think that a lot about what needed to happen there was more inclusion about the role that he played in this, what he can do now, what he is, as a donor, going to do as a result of his apology, and ultimately, how and why this event caused concern that ultimately blew up on the social media platforms." While this would have constituted a much more effective response, Liberman does believe that Ole Miss would have reacted similarly, meaning the removal of the name. That opinion differs from what Husni concluded.

Chapter 7 A Detached Perspective

Atish Baidya currently serves as the editorial director for the Student Media Center at the University of Mississippi. He works closely with *The Daily Mississippian*, as well as with NewsWatch Ole Miss, the university's television newscast. Baidya was not at Ole Miss when the Meek controversy unfolded. He did not join the university until February 2020. Baidya previously served as multimedia content editor at WOUB at Ohio University, as part of the celebrated Scripps College of Communication. I interviewed Baidya because I thought that it would aid my thesis to get the perspective of someone who was not here for the Meek situation, but who works closely with the publication that this thesis is focused on, to get a glimpse into some of the general practices and concerns that privately shape what gets published in student media.

Corporatization of Higher Education

I asked Baidya essentially the same question I asked Husni, which was: Does student media have an obligation to preserve or protect the university's image with how it covers a certain story that can be damaging to that image? He answered, flat out, no. "I don't believe that is what student media is for. That being said, it is a very tricky position, because you are technically a university employee, you are employed by the university, which pays your salary. And you do want, on one level, you want the university to look good, because, for a variety of reasons, but here's the thing: the argument (is) framed in a way in a perspective of 'university as a business,' as a 'corporation,' and not as a place of education and learning," he said. Baidya

said that the issue with this question is that people think about it in the wrong frame of mind. Sure, students want the university to do well, to attract students, to have a good reputation – but for student journalists, it is about learning how to do journalism, even difficult journalism, which requires reporting on university controversies that obviously portray the school in a negative way. "We should applaud and encourage and support (that learning) regardless of it makes the university look bad, because they're doing their jobs."

"If this is a place of higher education, and learning and growth and all that stuff, then the students doing their jobs in that learning and doing the process of reporting, is what they're here for. Why would you tamper that down?" he continued. Baidya argued that it is because of the corporatization of colleges and universities, in which admissions has become so competitive and schools vie so heavily for prospective students, and the money that comes from their tuition, that people have lost sight of the mission of higher education. He said that the university is a microcosm of society, but in a closed off, safe space kind of way, and that in that, student journalists should be free to practice their work just as a graduated journalist at a professional publication would.

As a result of this increased focus on business and public image, there has been a lot of focus coming from university administrations in working to limit bad press, by sort of weaponizing public relations departments against it. "They're trying to do what they can to control all of the messaging that's coming from the campus," Baidya said. "And they're encroaching upon or trying to push that perspective on student media, in…press and speech policies…It's becoming more of an issue than one before, I think."

This issue was prominent on the Ole Miss campus, beginning in the Fall 2019 semester and then being officially acted upon in February-March, 2020, just before the pandemic removed

the policy change from focus. What I am speaking about is a streamlined approach in the university media inquiry, including media inquiry with student media. I was a reporter and photographer with *The DM* at this time, and I encountered this issue myself. We started to experience problems with sources within the university refusing to talk to us. I remember covering a story on university housing pre-COVID, and the two people within the Housing Department that I contacted responded by referring me to Rod Guajardo, the News and Media Relations Director in University Marketing & Communications. It started happening to enough of us that there was a joke among the staff, "Talk to Rod." An official universal policy proposal that was being debated by faculty in early March 2020 would have allowed faculty members to speak with the media without university approval about only research, scholarship, professional expertise or as private persons, but they would have to seek advance approval from UM&C to speak on other subjects. I recall my professor in Advanced Reporting, Cynthia Joyce, leaving class one day to attend a faculty meeting as the School of Journalism's substitute representative on the matter (in the absence of another faculty member), and she told us beforehand that she was going to rail against the proposal. Journalism professor Charlie Mitchell heavily criticized the plan in a February 26, 2020, email featured in the *Mississippi Free Press* article: "The last thing a PUBLIC university worried about its image should do is shield faculty from public inquiries. No one is ever required to answer any media inquiry, but it's…an insult to posit that because someone may say something untoward or outside their lane that all communications should or must be screened," Mitchell said (Pittman). As COVID-19 became the university's foremost concern just two weeks later, the proposal fell by the wayside.

While Baidya doubled down on his argument that it is the business mindset of universities that is sparking this change in the way they are dealing with the press and with their

own student media, he also said that technology has allowed this sort of media bypass to happen. "(Universities) don't need to rely on the press as much anymore to get their message out. They can control the message themselves."

Prospect of Lost Autonomy, Lost Funding

With our discussions of the university operating as a business in mind, I asked Baidya if there are any fears that Ole Miss or other universities could cut funding to their student media programs as a backlash for what university administrations feel is unfair negative reporting against them or against the school. He said that while this is always a possibility, it is not a rational fear or concern presently. However, he did add that, in some college advisor groups he keeps up with online, there is chatter about other universities cutting funding to student media, and advisors feel that the cuts are not just coming from a money standpoint, but as a backhanded way to curb negative reporting and dissent among student media. When Baidya was at Ohio University, he said that his old boss had a very real fear that the university could take some kind of similar action. The university there owns WOUB's operating license, and its employees, while considered independent, are employees of the university, and the station budget was based on donations. Baidya's boss felt that the university might cut the share of the donation money that was given to the station for its operating expense because of the reporting it was doing. So, they at the station made the editorial decision to start attaching to their stories that Ohio University owns the operating license for the station, to make it clear that the station was part of the university, but also, and more importantly, to protect against some kind of backlash. The tag on the story would establish a clear connection in such event. Baidya said, though, that he did not share his boss's worries, and he does not share them here at Ole Miss, but such a move is not

unprecedented or impossible. The fact that the Student Media Center and the SOJNM have already lost money by Ed Meek retracting his donation adds an interesting factor to this.

Impact as Integral

I questioned Baidya, as I did in my previous two interviews, about the level of impact journalists can have on public opinion. Whereas Husni responded to the question in pointing out the decreasing impact of *The DM* on campus, and Liberman answered with the agenda-setting theory, Baidya's response is framed from the journalist's perspective. And that provides a different way of thinking of the matter. "That's what we all, what journalists want, they want their work to have impact…You're not doing that, just because you enjoy it, you're doing that because you're hoping to make a difference, hoping that…it contributes to something," Baidya said.

As an example of how publications can use tactics to purposefully increase their impact and drum up public conversation, Baidya provided the example of *The Daily Tarheels* newspaper at UNC – Chapel Hill, which used the word "clusterfuck" in a headline to describe the school's COVID response. It got a lot of people talking, not just about the use of the expletive in the headline but also about the pandemic. It went viral, and got the paper national attention that it would not have otherwise had. A similar thing happened on the Ole Miss campus in fall 2019, when upon the announcement of Glenn Boyce as university chancellor, *The DM* published a front-page editorial with the headline: "Bullshit."

As for the kind of impact student media can have on administrators, Baidya circled back to the idea of campus as a microcosmic society, and he equated university administration with the government. "You see how the press can influence policy or make changes or spur action or

change, through journalism, and through shining a light in the dark places that those in power probably don't want the light shone," he said. A relevant example that comes to mind with this point is the October 2, 2018, *DM* article that focused on Chancellor Vitter's inactivity in bringing the faculty's votes on Meek's name to the IHL. *The DM* had identified where it stood just two days after Meek's post in its "Enough" editorial. A member of the editorial board of the paper, assistant news editor Taylor Vance, who is among those attributed to that editorial, wrote the article on Vitter's inactivity. Seven days later, Vitter went to the IHL. We cannot know whether or not this kind of media pressure influenced Vitter in any way, if he had some kind of reservations about moving forward or if he wanted to wait longer. But *The DM* wanted change, and it used articles like this to try to get it. That raises the issue of objectivity, which is the focus of a later section in this chapter.

The Crux of the Issue

I asked Baidya about the possible intentions Meek had for his post. If he saw some kind of deep-rooted problem in Oxford, which the post says that he did, and he was posting it to attempt to call attention to those problems, then I postulated that when he shared these posts, he wanted the kind of explosive reaction he got, the kind that would spur people to action. But it backfired, in that the post attracted attention for all the wrong reasons.

Baidya did not attempt to speculate on Meek's intentions, but rather, he said that the change in media landscape during Meek's lifetime certainly could have had some bearing on what happened. To Baidya, the important issue and the one to question here, is what is the issue that he was trying to raise, regardless of whether it was done "in the best way possible or the worst way possible." "To me," he said, "all the other stuff is kind of noise. And that (the issue Meek was trying to raise) is the crux of the question, that's the crux of the issue…And then,

whatever point he was trying to make, what does that say about our society, or culture…I think that's the job of the journalist to explore that and talk about that." Baidya argued that journalists have to act as sociologists, documented history and searching for answers to the deep reasons and causes for why things happen.

A Disappearing Objectivity, and What it Means

Baidya expanded upon Husni's statements about objectivity in saying that not only is objectivity a myth and a construct of journalistic ethics, but he said that it is an outright possibility to achieve true objectivity. As a new generation is beginning to take over journalism, the old guard, which placed much value and faith in objectivity, is being replaced with younger folks who have disregarded it as a manufactured concept. It seems that journalism may be headed back to the days before objectivity was considered standard, when, as Husni referenced, papers were highly partisan and openly so.

Some of these changes are coming dramatically on college campuses, in the wake of 2020 and the George Floyd murder/Black Lives Matter movement. At Macalester College in Minnesota, the paper has identified that from here on out, it will be explicitly anti-racist, anti-fascist, and anti-colonialist as basic standards for professional conduct. Baidya said that while this isn't something we would consider to be traditionally objective, it is the sort of change that is coming in journalism.

Baidya said that some of these changes away from traditional objectivity are because that notion of objectivity is being viewed as racist, patriarchal and oppressive, in addition to the obvious roots in capitalism as way to monetize on advertisement revenues. The shift to this

thinking is the belief that what came to be regarded as "objective" was really just what was normal and inoffensive through the straight, white male's perspective.

And while Baidya said he is not sure yet if this move away from traditional objectivity is the way to go, he says that as a person of color, he thinks that moving away from traditional objectivity as the standard, and to a standard of fairness and accuracy, might be the correct move. Because journalism is so based on perception, and because people come from such varied backgrounds, people can experience the same thing in so many different ways based on life experience. This related back to the point that Husni made about how the state of media today, a fragmented state in which people on either political side are watching news that portrays vastly different realities. Baidya said that "truth with a capital 'T'" is something that means different things for different people because of life experience. "People see things with the lenses that they wear, you know, where people literally are living in fundamentally two different realities. Because perception is reality for people," he said. He did say that journalists do have an obligation to tell all sides of the story deeply, because there are not just two sides to the story. "If you want to call that objectivity, okay, we can call that objectivity. But I don't think that's the world, I think we need to change the word because that's not what it is. And that doesn't make sense to me anymore."

A big problem with the landscape today is just that people are unable to communicate through their differences and perspectives. "We as a society have lost the art. We don't know how to have hard conversations," Baidya said. "This tension that we see happening in terms of the divisiveness across differences, that comes because people on both sides are carrying a lot of baggage and trauma and all this other stuff, and don't know how to communicate and talk to each other…We never learned that as a culture."

Conclusion

In writing this thesis, I did not set out to answer whether or not Meek's post was racist, or whether he himself is a racist. I will say, though, that I was one of those people whom Dean Norton referenced in the video the School of Journalism released, who at the time believed that while Meek's post was unjustifiable, his post was not racist and did not warrant removing his name from Farley Hall, especially given a lifetime's body of work in support of the university and others' support of him as someone who believed in civil rights and integration at a time when these were not popular beliefs on the Ole Miss campus.

After writing this thesis, I still feel that way. Regardless of Blake Tartt's personal feelings in sharing those pictures with Ed Meek, and regardless of attempts to portray Ed Meek as a serial racist in bringing up examples of him doing his job as the university's public relations officer in defending the university against media scrutiny, I believe Ed Meek when he said that there was no racist intent in his Facebook post. Blake Tartt had obvious racist intent, and I think that because the video and photos he shared with Meek only featured perceived negative appearances of Black women on the Square, ignoring equal examples of this in White women, Meek published these two photos and, with what he believed were negative happenings in Oxford on his mind, shared these photos without thinking about how they might be perceived as pictures of two Black women, and not realizing how he might hurt these women by publicly shaming the way they dressed.

I think the true error in his post gets lost, in that it is an invasion of privacy of these two women trying to have a night on the Square. To publicly expose these students and to attach much larger societal problems in Oxford to them is the true reprehensible action here, and I believe that Meek knows that. Certainly then, I still believe that removing his name from the School of Journalism and New Media was too harsh a decision, especially when the man leading that charge, Dean Will Norton, was refusing to challenge blatantly racist comments and sentiments in his emails with Tartt, in the pursuit of donations.

It is now obvious that the university has a very toxic relationship with some donors that its academics very clearly do not see eye-to-eye with. It makes little sense then that Norton and university administration as a whole would publicly shame Meek in this way. The situation portrays Dean Norton as a hypocrite, as it does to any faculty member or administrator who entertained similar things in private and/or had friendly conversations with donors who said similar things in private. As a result of the Meek fallout, there is an obligation to no longer entertain donors and accept money from those whom faculty and administration would want to publicly distance themselves from.

The fact of the matter is, with the above statements, doing what the university did to Ed Meek is just asinine, and from a funding standpoint, it makes zero sense. Ed Meek took the fall, and now the School of Journalism and its entities, such as the Student Media Center, are treading water for funding because millions of dollars have vanished. It was simply not a smart play.

In all my focus on the content of Meek's original Facebook post, I really had not taken the time until writing this to look at either of his two apologies. The first, which was the very brief one and the second was contained in his post requesting that his name be removed from the School of Journalism. My interviews with Husni and Liberman illuminated that a big part of the

controversy was contained his Meek's poor apologies, as they both suggested, in one way or another, that had his apology has been more strategic, more heartfelt, more directed, he may have been able to save his reputation and avoid this very ugly public saga.

As I lay out in the above chapters, *The Daily Mississippian*'s coverage shows that it exhibited bias in its coverage of Meek, through some of the news articles it published and more evidently with the opinion articles it chose to publish. The September 21, 2018, editorial that called for the removal of Meek's name from the school, among other things, showed a clear stance on the issue by the paper's editors. These editors, who orchestrate which stories are covered, what goes into the paper, how stories are edited, etc., showed with this statement that they were taking a stance on this issue, and it was to be not only in condemnation of Ed Meek, but to outwardly support the removal of his name from Farley Hall.

And as I confirmed through this thesis, it is my own opinion in researching *The DM* that it did not publish truly objective news about Ed Meek after his Facebook post. My discussions with Husni and Baidya changed the frame in which I think about the coverage. I believed, and I still do for the most part, that *The Daily Mississippian*, as the student newspaper of the university, has an obligation to present its news in an utmost balanced way that does not appear to the reader as biased. When I was a reporter there, I prided myself on being as straight-down-the-middle as one could possibly be on whatever issue I was covering. I expected the same of the publication as a whole, and when in Fall 2018, I was not perceiving that treatment of the coverage of Meek, it irked me, I had failed to consider that maybe the paper was not trying to be that objective at all. Husni and Baidya presented to me the idea that the paper's status as the university's student paper gives it no added responsibility to objectivity, and that as the walls of objectivity are being torn down at papers across the country with this new generation of

reporters, the paper itself does not have to pretend to be truly objective. What I mean is, I liken the "Enough" editorial with what the Macalester College paper did. By laying out what the paper's editors believe, it gives a level of transparency to the editorial decision-making, although I may not agree with it. This different way of thinking about *The DM*'s coverage was a major takeaway from my thesis research. And the two succinct conclusions drawn from it are that A) as Husni and Baidya said, publicly-funded media does not have an obligation to alter its coverage in any way to protect the institutions that support it and B) objectivity as a traditional tenet of journalistic ethics is no longer a requirement, and as consumers, we will have to learn to no longer expect it, as the new standards become fairness and accuracy.

Epilogue

I must conclude finally by saying that, as disappointing as it may be, life is most often not a fiction novel with a finely wrapped plot ending. And this thesis certainly does not have one. If I learned anything, I learned that this is a much more complex issue than I even previously thought, especially given what I learned about Dean Norton through the *Mississippi Free Press* story. This Meek saga is often portrayed as a black-and-white event with obvious heroes and villains, but I think that the whole situation is a whole lot of gray matter, and there are deep-seated, institutional problems with most of the elements of society involved: the university, the press, race, etc. To end succinctly, this was/is a mess.

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Appendix A: Dr. Samir Husni Interview

Samir Husni

Now?

Mason Scioneaux

Yes, how student media, particularly, the DM covered the Meek situation in 2018? So in regards to the statement in the email, can you just set the record straight on what your opinions actually are in regards to that?

Samir Husni

Well I mean, the one I mean, the reason I decided not to continue with that committee is, I did not feel that students should be on that committee. Because students were part of the - I mean, they are our main concern, and how can they be on a committee that is going to be working for what's best for the future. And I mean, I felt like after having meetings, the students who were on the committee, we were going into so many tangents, and I wanted to focus on reconciliation I wanted to focus on and we were not in any shape or form, as to talk about taking Meek's name down or not, because that had happened before the committee ever met. I mean, the faculty decided on that and voted on that. And that was already in progress. So I mean, the committee was more about looking to the future. And I felt like, I've never as a journalist never believed in issuing statements. I mean, I believe that journalists should never be in the business of issuing statements or giving their opinions. I mean, I tell everybody who's willing to listen that when a journalist gives his or her opinion, he or she is no longer a journalist. And that's what my professors told me in school in the 70s. That's what I adhere to. And when we were more involved in opinion, discussions and statements, and I decided, I mean, that's just not for me, I'm more of an action person. And but I don't think I mean, the decision, I mean, to take Meek's name down, was a decision that the faculty voted on. And it was not the discussion in the committee. One of the things that I mentioned in those meetings is let's not, I mean, you're talking to a person who probably have suffered from race issues, I mean, in my 37 years in Mississippi, but I was always able to divert those issues, and use them as energy and fuel to help me focus on my mission, which is education and teaching students and working with all students. And so, I mentioned in that faculty meeting when they were talking about, I said, like, you know, let's be clear about one thing, let's not put all the ills of state of Mississippi and all the racist issues that took place in the state of Mississippi, historically speaking until now, on one person, namely Ed Meek. I said, I mean, right or wrong, we should not, I mean, Ed Meek should not be blamed on the Confederate statue on the Confederate flag on the so. So it was like, we were reaching a stage where the two extremes were taking place and how can you have any reconciliation if you are taking one of the two extremes? And that's really that's what I felt like, we're better off. Especially since I know how the school was born. You know, I am the senior faculty member. I've been here for 37 years. So I know every little tiny history of this, and I'm the one that submitted to the IHL. When I was chair of the department of journalism in '09, I submitted to the IHL, the forms that were required for us to become a school of journalism. And my papers that I submitted under my signature that went to the provost's office, were to establish a school of journalism. That was the name there was no Meek attached to the name. There were no 'new media' attached to the name, because I'm a firm believer that journalism is new media every day. I mean, this is to me it's a redundancy, calling it journalism and new media. I mean, journalism is new media. Every single day it keeps on changing. Now how did the name end up with the school, I have no earthly idea. I was never, never privy to

those discussions. I mean, actually, I was not even as chair of the department, I was not privy on some of the discussions that were taking place. And that's what I told the faculty I said, if somebody wants to feel like they were hurt, or they were like, you're looking at the person, but I'm not going to blame Ed Meek, for all the ills of the state of Mississippi, it's as simple as that.

Mason Scioneaux

In regards to the common ground committee in what you see, as you said, students shouldn't have been on that committee would you say because, you know, students would be on that committee while also working on student media. And that's a conflict of interest,

Samir Husni

It's not a matter of conflict of interest, it's a matter of, you know, there were a very set agenda for that committee to come out to some kind of resolution, to help reconciliation to look for the future. And when you have people on that committee who are like, on one hand, as working journalists, and i.e., they cannot keep I mean, they, you cannot be acting as a journalist, and as a committee member at the same time, and then go and report, what happened in the committee. I mean, I'm all for the freedom of the press, and the transparency and you name it. But when you are sitting in a meeting, and you are like dealing with sensitive topics like that, and, and feeling that every single word you are going to say can be taken out of context, and published in a way. And that's probably how it ended up like with the quote that you have that I left the committee because I did not want to take Ed Meek's name down from the school, which is 100% wrong there to say, I mean, I deny that from now to eternity. And because I had nothing to do with having Ed Meek on the name of the school. And in fact, you may find out some of my quotes, and some of my said, like, I mean, I probably was one of the few who were against even becoming a school. And my questioning for the administration back then is like, four or $5 million, for $5 million. I mean, you are selling us off, because who's going to give us any more money. If you are naming a school for $5 million, or if you are becoming a school, that's and that's one reason I stepped down as Chair, I mean, I didn't want anything to do with it, and started the magazine Innovation Center, which is the best decision I've made in my life.

Mason Scioneaux

And when you serve on the common ground committee, what kinds of issues did the committee handle? You know, you said it was after the Meek thing played out, but how would you say, the aftermath of that affected the discussions the committee had?

Samir Husni

Well I mean, you know, the ultimate goal of the committee was to find new common grounds. That's what's called common grounds. And then all of a sudden, the issues in those meetings, and some of the students that will be presented on that committee. I mean, all of a sudden, they wanted to bring the Native Americans issue they wanted to bring, like, you know, all the minorities, they wanted to start bringing, like speakers from all walks, of phrases, and folks and said, like, let's do what we have, let's reconcile among each other first, before

we reach out, before we start, like, you know, worrying about like, the indigenous Americans and this and this, I mean, everyone's like, and, and that's, that's one reason I hate statements. That's one reason I say like, I cannot stand people issuing statements, because it's just talk. And it's just like, it becomes more of a, an agenda setting that this is Hear me out. This is what I have to say. I am more than a person of like, you know, facts. A person who as a true journalist, I mean, report. I mean, I just finished writing with two colleagues an article for the Poynter Institute, about how magazines are celebrating blackness for the first time in history. I mean, and but I have the 126 magazines that you know, when GQ for three months in a row have a black person on the cover, which they've never had in the entire 75-year history. This is News that needs to be reported. Much more than just GQ issuing a statement. Yeah, we support BlackLivesMatter You know, there is a big difference between the two. And that's what I felt that means I don't have time to have all these, which some people may enjoy and some people may like, but, but I am a person of action. And I felt like we are going to be dragging in and having one meeting after the other. And, and in order for us to come up with some kind of a statement that at the end of the day will end up like all committee reports, in some drawer with nobody paying attention.

Mason Scioneaux

Right. And, you know, based on what you said about your opinions on statements, then would you say or do you think that Chancellor Vitter's original statement condemning the Meek Facebook post - was that rightfully done, or...?

Samir Husni

He's not a journalist. I mean, he is he is the chancellor. And he's the leader. And I truly believe that he was on the right side of history when he made that statement. Because, again, I mean, and I told that to so many people, I mean, I don't know, whether you believe in higher powers or in God, or I mean, I'm a true believer, I believe that when God or some higher power, tell you that, hesitate. It's a good sign to stop. But when you tell me that I hesitated before I posted this thing, and yet I posted it. To me, it's like double jeopardy. So and the fact that the depiction of those two black students was unacceptable under any shape, or form. I mean, what if there were I mean, God knows how many white students I've seen in the same state of drunkenness. Clotheslessness. And I think it's the combination of the pictures and the words that ignited the response from the chancellor and the response from the school, etc. Because again, I mean, you have to remember, we as human beings, and in fact, I wrote an article about the art of show and tell. I mean, writing or typing is like talking, it's the new talking. The images and the pictures are the new scene, that's where we are. And so, it's like, all of a sudden, you cannot separate. I mean, a lot of people try to separate all the pictures, if the pictures were not there. Well, that's a big if. Because I mean, a lot of people may have agreed with the content of the Facebook posts, but not to the pictures. But you cannot isolate, I mean we as human beings, we use all our senses together. It's not like, oh, let me just separate this copy from this picture. It's all as a package. And that's why I mean, I mean, I think it was only fair for the Chancellor to issue that statement. We had a big huge listening thing, which is another thing I'm not a big fan of but I mean, it's to me, the issue, revealed a really major divide that is still shaping the country. And still, and as one editor said, from a British magazine, maybe there's something good about 2020 and this Coronavirus, because it's forcing people to be isolated, to be alone, to have time to reflect and think. And the killing of George Floyd. You know, happened at a time we're all isolated. We're all like, and we had no distraction. So it's awakening the senses of people that you know, maybe we've ignored 400 years of history, and maybe we were never the diverse country that we are which is a

collective of minorities, rather than a majority of white and a minority of black and, and blacks were mistreated and you name it. So I think your generation is going to have the best of times because the future will show that like when a magazine like Forbes yesterday announced they're not going to use the term minority anymore. They will never refer to any person now by the color of their skin. I mean, your generation will reap the benefits of those and our students. That's why I mean, that was a wakeup call, that let's rethink the mission of the school and what we are doing, and whom are we. I mean, even now, we are rethinking the way and how we are going to accept money from people. And what are the guidelines before we accept money from anyone. So even with that major failure that took place in 2018, we are going to learn from it and reap a lot of benefits for the future as we move forward.

Mason Scioneaux

And how do you view the way student media like the DM covered that event in the wake of that with the controversy going on?

Samir Husni

Yeah, I mean, the students did a great job. My only criticism is the criticism I have from other people that it is more one sided. But again, I mean, people forget that this whole concept of objectivity in journalism, is a concept that was created mainly to appease the advertisers. I mean, journalism always had an opinion angle. When the first newspapers were started, they were as partisan as it can be. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, when advertising started funding the bill. And we started putting people on welfare information and giving them the paper almost for free, or the magazine for free. Because the advertisers were footing the bill. And people, normal folks, it's so hard for them to differentiate between what's an opinion, and what's a news story. So anything they saw in the Daily Mississippian, they could not differentiate that somebody wrote a column, or if somebody wrote a new story, between the two. And, and, but I think I believe the students did a great job and under so much stress, and under so much, I mean, no matter agree or disagree with the opinion page of the Daily Mississippian, just the mere fact that you have students who are dedicated to work and follow their passion as journalists, and to do their best to the best of their ability that should never been, that should never be underscored. I mean, those kids. I mean, they, I mean, their friends hate them, some people hate them, the sorority, fraternity, you name it, but they are following their passion. I mean, they are following what they believe, I mean, journalism to me is a calling. And, and, and, and to me, even if they did mistakes, which God knows, I mean, all of us do mistakes. I think they did an excellent job in terms of covering and being on the two sides of journalism. with the understanding that I may not agree with all the opinion writers, but I mean, this is life. I mean, if we are all going to agree with everyone and everything, then we would be living in a totalitarian, totalitarian society, which, you know, all of us who will be nothing, but like, you know, if we all think the same that nobody is thinking,

Mason Scioneaux

Right. And in, you know, you talked about objectivity with the coverage that the DM was doing. Um, do you think that as the school's, the university's premier student publication, it has an obligation to be objective and present both sides fairly?

Samir Husni

What I mean, if there's two sides, then you present two sides. And, and that's why that's what to me, the opinion page is all about. I mean, that's, to me is like, if somebody voices an opinion from the right, okay, we can have somebody to voice an opinion from the left. But what two sides are for the story when they say like, the faculty of the School of Journalism, voted to recommend the removal of the name or this or that, and I don't remember what was the vote in terms of like, because I don't think it was up to the faculty to decide to remove the name or not. I mean, it was, you know, it's like saying it was not up to the faculty to decide what the name of the school is. So, so this is there are so many things, and that take place above our pay scale. And that's what I keep on reminding the faculty that Yeah, I guess being old and being the senior faculty member is good to send you some reminders. So many things happen around here that are way above our pay scale. And we can say anything we want. But we don't have the final say we don't have the final decision. And I think the Daily Mississippian, covering like, you know, what the faculty voted or what the Provost recommended, or what the IHL voted, I think they did a great job in following that coverage. I mean, I think most of the criticism that comes to the Daily Mississippian comes from the opinion writers, comes sometimes from the way you write the headline, and, and but, you know, free country, Free Press, the beauty of the United States of America is we have the something called the First Amendment. And, you know, I'll protect that to the last of my blood.

Mason Scioneaux

And how would you relate that coverage of the Meek event to the way that students, the DM has covered other school controversies and administrative decisions in general?

Samir Husni

Well, there's an inherent bias, because the editors and most of the really folks working at the Daily Mississippian are journalism students. So, proximity becomes an issue. I mean, do we find in the Daily Mississippian articles about students in the accountancy school winning awards, or this or this yet, anytime our students win awards, you'll find it in the Daily Mississippian. So, it's part of that human nature, part of the proximity. And that's why it was a very tough issue for the DM and the student media in general. Because, I mean, now, we're not covering a positive thing. We're covering a negative thing. And how can we do it without burning our toes and burning our fingers? I mean, it was a big challenge. It was it was it was not easy on them. Because of that inherent bias that has always existed, that we have the tendency to cover the journalism school. And before that the journalism department more than any other school or department, because we living in it, and we are seeing it on everyday basis, unlike, you know, trying to go to the school of business or to the engineering school and see what's happening over there.

Mason Scioneaux

Do you think that the coverage in student media by and large is too negative or is it too critical of school controversy and not reflective enough of school success? Because that's a big criticism.

Samir Husni

Oh, I know. And, and, and it is, and it is, because that's the role of the newspaper. I mean, over the years, we've always said, you want positive news, pick up a magazine, you want nothing but like, you know, relaxing, and hey, like, life is good. Pick up a magazine. You want to know what's bad is happening in the world - pick up a newspaper. So I mean, inherited in the newspaper is that negativity. And I mean, can you imagine how many people would be picking up a newspaper if every day you are telling them 'all is great in Oxford, Mississippi, nothing happened. I mean, everybody is happy.' I mean, it's, it's, it's against the expectation, because psychologically speaking, people relate to the bad news, because it gives them more of hope that bad news happened to somebody else. So, I am okay now. If they read about a car accident, they feel, 'oh, I'm safe now, because what are the chances of two people having a car accident and I'm one of them?' So that's why people where they criticize the negativity, but they forget what is true journalism. I mean, you know, one of the funniest things that I tell people all the time, the definition of journalism in Arabic, is 'the profession of looking for trouble.' I mean, that's how we define journalism. And you want to be a journalist on the safe side, become an editor for a Fitness magazine and try to be creative and find a new way to lose weight every single month, or a new way to build your ads. But if you aren't going to work as a true reporter, as a true journalist, you're going to get in trouble. And if you have way too many Friends, then you're doing something wrong. I mean, it's as simple as that.

Mason Scioneaux

And how would you see the - how would you distinguish between the DM and like another publication with a lot of student output like Hotty Toddy, which a lot of alumni prefer because they think it's more positive with the community. Would you think that - would you say that Hotty Toddy is more reflective of what magazine coverage is like. And that's the distinguishing line between the two?

Samir Husni

I mean, first, there is a big difference between a digital platform and a print platform. Any digital platform is like the river, the author keeps on changing. If you've got a mistake, you can go back and change it. And somebody tells you, I didn't like this headline, like in the case of the New York Times, you go and you change the headline online. Once it's printed, it becomes permanent, and with permanency, there is more time for people to look at, digest, critique, get mad at - you name it. But if it's like disposable, it's just 'now I see it, now I don't,' it becomes a completely different issue. And when and I don't really follow Hotty Toddy that much in terms of like the online thing and what they cover. But remember, if it's just Community News, I mean, what was the role of community journalism, in the good old days when we had daily papers almost in every single town, it was more of the refrigerator journalism. I mean, when I first came to Oxford, Mr. Phillips told me when I was like, shocked, coming from Missouri to see an editorial in the Oxford Eagle, about how Miss Nina, who was the editor, loves to wake up in the middle of the night, go to her fridge and pick up a jar of peanut butter and digs her finger in the peanut butter and lick her finger. I said, 'Oh my god, this is journalism? I just graduated from Missouri.' I mean it's like, 'what's going on?' And Mr. Phillips has to explain to me that this is what they call 'refrigerator journalism.' This is the journalism where people just want like, 'and Susie came to Sunday school, she brought her famous pecan pie,' - you cut that picture of Aunt Susie with the pecan pie and you put it on the fridge. So the people behind, and Meek was behind Hotty Toddy to start with. I mean, it's his still his - that sense of community journalism, like let's focus on the positive, uplifting thing - is more of

a magazine style, is the service magazine style in terms of like, 'yeah, we know there's a lot of ills in this world.' I mean, I I've interviewed more than 50, CEOs and magazine editors and publishers during COVID, during this time period. And the consensus was like, 'you know, if my magazine is about farming, or if my magazine is about the city or if my magazine is about this or that? I mean, depends on what's my DNA of the magazine. I don't care if we have a civil war. I don't care if we have COVID I don't care if we have World War One, World War Two, people are already here and find that in so many other sources. When they get my magazine, they want to know about farming, they want to know about when am I going to plant the rice or when I'm going to plant the cotton.'

Mason Scioneaux

And does student media, in your view, have a significant role in shaping public opinion? Like, especially on campus, in a situation like the Meek event, the DM and other student media have shaped the way people on campus talk about it.

Samir Husni

I think they used to have much more power in shaping the opinion, when they were published daily, when they were in your face. See again, this is this is one of the big things, and I am one of the people who fought so hard to bring student media under the School of Journalism and the Department of Journalism, rather than keeping it in Student Life. I made it sort of like a goal for me when I was chair of the department of journalism to bring student media under journalism instead of under student life, which happen when right before we became a school, and then we became a school. Out of sight out of mind. When students used to walk in and see all these hallways filled with the Daily Mississippians, the printed thing. When I used to teach in the auditorium upstairs and the janitors had to clean the auditorium from all these newspapers. It has much more influence, I believe, than just getting an email in the morning, or going to go online. The people who, like when I go and look at the online and look at the, I think you can count between maybe less than 50 people who are continuously criticizing the DM. So that influence is still within this limited circle. I mean, the remaining 14-15,000 students on campus, don't give a hoot. And this is not only representative of student media, this is representative of the state of journalism, as we know it. Now, I mean, journalism started dying in this country in 1980, when a cable news network called CNN, not because of CNN, but because we took news from a 22-minute cycle to a 24-hour cycle. And then with the internet and social media, journalism died, I mean, social media put the last nail of the coffin on journalism. And I'm hoping, being a Presbyterian, that life after death, that we will have journalism back again. But we are witnessing a big huge decline of journalism, as we see it, and all the outlets, and the more they decline, the less influence they have. I mean, I told my class yesterday, I mean, President Trump can appoint Jesus Christ to the Supreme Court. And you are going to find some media people and some journalists criticizing that decision, that there's something wrong with Jesus Christ to be on the Supreme Court. And vice versa. I mean, whatever Biden says, I mean, journalism has declined to the lowest. I don't know. I mean, I mean, I really believe journalism is dead. I mean, we have to have a big awakening. And we've seen that awakening on the magazine side, where all of a sudden, I mean, people discovered that for 400 years, we've been like ignoring this big huge segment of the population. And now it's going to happen, what with the magazine side, and with the newspaper side, that the same thing will happen on campus. I mean, it's, I mean, unless you have the Daily Mississippian back in your face - I mean, when was the last time you went to the DM website? Or when you went to the? I mean, as I asked the class, where do they get their news? Twitter. And what type of news do they get? I mean, even the definition of news. And this is,

as an aside, I mean, I think President Trump, once he gets elected, re-elected, should credit the media with his re-election, because it's unbelievable. I mean, it is, I mean, the distrust and hatred for the media that exists today. That if I don't agree with you, I hate you, and that's why I keep calling you all the future industry leaders. And you are the ones that are going to feel that pain and hopefully, from the wounds of all that pain and sorrow, evolution will come and journalism will come back.

Mason Scioneaux

Would you blame the death of journalism as you see it on the interjection of opinion into news like that vitriol that both sides feel for one another?

Samir Husni

100%. I mean, when I first came to this country in 1978, Walter Cronkite was the most trusted man in America. He was the anchorman for CBS News. He delivered the news 22 minutes a day, told us what happened. He did not have any Talking Heads coming on his show or telling you this or that and asking opinion. It was just 'this is what happened today,' in 22 minutes. Can you name a single journalist today that has a higher trust than a used car salesman and the downfall of a country? I mean, it's just like, it's sad. It's sad and comical at the same time, that when you're watching the news, and the anchor person tells you like, 'President Trump said this, this this, but he lied. And we know he's lying, because he's always lying,' I mean, what type of news is this? I mean, it's like we're no longer focused on delivering that. This is what the President said, this is what Biden said. Leave it up to the people to make up their mind. Don't try to feed the fire. Because now we are living, I wish we were only living in two different countries. God knows how many countries we are living in. I mean, every television channel, you flip, you think you are living in a different country. And the biggest reason I keep on saying that journalism dead, is because if everyone thinks they are a journalist, then nobody is a journalist, when you have from the President of the United States, to my grandson, who can tweet 140 characters and think they are good at delivering information and content for you. And this is journalism, then nobody is a journalist.

Mason Scioneaux

And do you think that when the Daily Mississippian cut down to once a week, this semester, that really is like a red alarm for what the state of affairs is in journalism?

Samir Husni

It is. it is. Mainly because, you know, I created the Magazine Innovation Center for one purpose: to amplify the future of print in a digital age. And I always believed that we never had, and we don't have, a problem with ink on paper. We have a problem with the business model, that ink on paper depended on for years, i.e., selling the customers, rather than selling the content. The Daily Mississippian used to say, 'we have 10,000 print, run every day, and look at every student picking it up, every student. Advertisers, come advertisers, give us the money; we can afford to give the paper for free.' We have to change the business model to a business model where we are in business of selling content and finding customers who count. I mean, how many students you

think, if I put a price tag of 25 cents on the Daily Mississippian, and put it in a box, would be putting their 25 cents? The content of the Daily Mississippian must be also essential. You know, when we play a game against Alabama and we lose and the headline is like, you know, Alabama 54, Ole Miss, like 42 or something like that, who did not know that, the day it happened? News and paper has become an oxymoron, we have to find a new way, I have to create a Daily Mississippian on a daily basis, that answers 'what's in it for me?', as a student, as a faculty member as an administrator at Ole Miss. So, the daily paper must look and feel like a weekly but published on a daily basis. And the minute it's out of sight, it's out of mind. I mean, how many people are going to think, 'Oh, is it like, like, last year they were published like three times a week. And now it's like, Oh, is it like Thursday? Is it Tuesday? When is the paper out?' And it's so it's like when people see that even the Daily Mississippian is no longer daily, how am I going to believe in it? And you know, instead, like revamp and make it like a weekly and call it like, you know, the Mississippian, and bring it more like a weekly magazine. So people will know that you know, times are changing, rather than try to keep your foot in the past. 'Oh, we are the Daily Mississippian. But we are published on a weekly basis.' That's like a student of mine who wanted to start a quarterly magazine, which would be published monthly. I said, 'why are you then calling it a quarterly?' And he said, 'like GQ, Gentlemen's Quarterly, is published monthly.'

Mason Scioneaux

And this is the last thing I want to touch on. So what do you make of cancel culture? And do you see its effects as detrimental to our society?

Samir Husni

You know, there are two schools of thought on that. One is that let's cancel all the previous country culture and pretend it never happened. Two, let's look at the culture of past, see the failures and see what can we learn from it and move forward? You know, nobody, nobody can cancel history. And no matter how much we hide it and how much we pretend that it did not happen, if I delete... you know you go to any major city in Europe now, or in the United States, and you will find those Holocaust museums with all the brutal images with all the stuff that you know, Hitler did. You don't find museums adoring Hitler or showing Hitler. I mean, you will see some pictures in those museums of Hitler and what not, but we have to ensure that history does not repeat itself by showing what really happened, and why civil war happened in this country. So if I remove all the monuments and remove everything that, you know, of the Civil War, does this mean - civil war did not happen? Cancel culture is so dangerous because, to me, it takes away from us the images and the records that help us study what happened, move forward, learn from the mistake, learn from the errors. I mean, can you imagine we reach to a stage in this country, that one day, there will be no reference to the Civil War? And everything will have vanished? All the stuff like bad or good that people agree on or don't agree on? What will that tell our future generation, about our past? Oh, we were always a great country, look at that. Nothing has ever happened. Let's just erase those years of the Civil War. And life would be good. So, I mean, it's it's - there's a danger with the, with the cancel culture. Because it's, it's - where do you stop? I mean, if I don't agree with you, I'm going to cancel him. I mean, after all, we are a country made of immigrants, from all over the world. I mean, I mean, people who came to this country are immigrants, and we at one stage, we became a melting pot. Now, we are more like a cafeteria, where everybody can pick and choose. And when you have a cafeteria, you can take one dish, and nobody will know it was ever there. But when you have a melting pot, all the ingredients are so important. And as we move forward, I mean, as we look at 2025 and 2030, you will see that we will be a country of collective minorities and the white will be a minority, the black will be a minority

Hispanics will be a minority, Asian Americans will be a minority, I mean, American Indians will be a minority - we will be a collective of minorities. And I think between COVID and the killing of George Floyd, where there were no distractions, there is an awakening taking place in the media in this country. And as one of our colleagues, a former student of mine, says, 'if an alien landed in the United States, and only looked at the media, he would now know that there are Blacks in America now for sure. That alien will know that there are Blacks in America and Hispanics, and you know, so on.

Mason Scioneaux

And finally, given the current climate and the way cancel culture has played a role in our society, do you think that you know, regardless of the statement, what happened to Ed Meek in the aftermath is a result of canceled culture?

Samir Husni

No, I think what happened to Ed Meek was a result of a big mistake that he did. And as a result of people in this day and age, who don't know how to say, 'I'm sorry, I messed up. Please forgive me.' I mean, those three sentences - I'm sorry. I messed up. Please forgive me. - would have ended that whole issue right there and then. But we we've become a nation where nobody apologizes for anything, wrong or right. 'I am always right, you're wrong.' Or, 'you did not understand me. This is not what I really meant to say.' I mean, it takes courage to admit that you are wrong, to admit that you are asking for forgiveness, to admit that you're sorry. That should have never happened before. That's why I mean, that's why I believe that social media is going to destroy our democracy. Because there is no editing, there is no filter, anyone can say anything they want. And that's the biggest danger that we have. When everybody can run his mouth or her mouth and say whatever they want. I don't know where we're going to end. I mean, it is it is the beginning of the end of our democracy as we know it social media, where a lot of people are praising it now and say, 'Oh, it's democratizing the, the communication.' Stuff like that is going to kill us one by one in a very slow moving 140 characters at a time.

Mason Scioneaux

So, would you say that the apology that Meek issued on Facebook afterwards was inadequate?

Samir Husni

It was not an apology. I mean, it was like I mean, it's like anytime I tell you, 'I'm sorry. But I didn't mean this or that.' I mean, apologies to me, in my book, you know, it's like John 1:9 in the Bible tells us if we confess our sins, He will forgive us. If confession cannot be like 'God, I'm so sorry you know. I slept with that person I should not have, but you know, the circumstances, you know...' This is not a confession - same thing with the apology. All what he should have said - I'm sorry, I messed up, I should not have put this. Please forgive me. And delete the whole thing and just... Who among us did not do mistakes and with this social media world with this, like, no filtering, nothing. And with your conscious telling you, like, 'I hesitated before I do that.' Heck, I mean, the minute I hesitate of doing anything, I don't do it.

Appendix B: Dr. Corey Liberman Interview

Mason Scioneaux

All righty, we're recording. Really appreciate you taking the time to do this. And I saw your work online, I was looking for people who are experts in this field and you came up. And yeah, I'm super excited, we're getting to do this, just to kind of talk about my thesis research in person. Again, so yeah, we, so I'm a senior in the school of journalism at the University of Mississippi, which you would probably know as Ole Miss. And I am doing a thesis, basically, on the effect that student media with keeping our, our school newspaper in mind, how student media can affect administrative, administrative decisions, kind of, in the situation when controversy arises. And how that that coverage by student media can affect public perception of those controversies. And kind of how the, those all relate to one another. And then obviously, you know, speaking to you today, we can think about that in the context of, of communications theory. So, if you have any questions just about the topic, and how it relates, feel free to ask. I can kind of kind of fill you in on the background. But if you're ready, we can kind of get started with the questions.

Corey Liberman

Yes. I feel comfortable and I am ready.

Mason Scioneaux

Okay, great. Um, so, I pre-submitted these questions to you. So, I'm just going to go down the line. And if anything else comes up, I'll interject with follow up questions. Um, but yeah, I'll get started with the list. So very broadly, what is communications theory?

Corey Liberman

All right. So I would argue that this is predicated on a course I've been teaching for about the last 15 years. But we in the field of communication have over 40 of our own theories that have been developed by communication theorists. Some of our ideas throughout the literature have been borrowed from the fields of psychology, from the fields of sociology, from the theories of anthropology from a lot of the other social sciences, we have, probably about 50 of our own theories, and what I teach is that theories allow us to do really three things, they allow us to explain what describe - describe what, explain why and predict when, and each of these approaches, things like interpersonal communication, group communication, organizational communication, in the case of your particular project, mediated communication, areas of public relations, areas of health communication, and really what these theories are doing is after decades of research is they're trying to explain, most likely from a message design perspective, what seems to work, why it seems to work and when it seems to work. So, you know, one area might be health communication, for example, and what we might be interested in is: how it is that we can create campaigns about organ donation. So what are the messages that people need to be exposed to? Why are these the messages that are going to increase the likelihood of things like organ donation? And when are these messages most appropriate? Right now, probably a better example would have been political communication. As a politician, you notice that there are within the last three months or so we see on television, in advertisements, a lot of attack ads. So, it's rather than promoting our cause, it's promoting messages that are trying to get and then try to attack our, our, our

adversaries. So especially comes from a political perspective, from a theoretical perspective from politics is, what sorts of messages work? Why do they work? And when did they work? So really, that's how I would answer that first question about what communication theory is, it's, it's an effort to better understand the human social condition and the link between message design, message framing, message discourse, and message outreach in terms of again, answering those three questions. What, why, and when - description, explanation and prediction.

Mason Scioneaux

Okay, and basing on something you said in that answer, I'd like to ask real quick, what can your research and your knowledge of communications theory say about the way that we handle conflict in a public forum.

Corey Liberman

There is a lot of research out there in the world of conflict. And whenever I teach a group class for example, there are several different strategies of conflict. Some of the conflict literature says that conflict avoidance is a good idea. But in the late 1990s, a group of researchers out of West Virginia University said, 'you know what, conflict is not a bad thing,' right? Conflict is actually a good thing. There are ways of interacting conflict or dialoguing about conflict, that is better. For example, there are two variables linked to conflict, verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness. And while argumentativeness sounds rhetorically like a bad thing, being verbally aggressive is not necessarily the end of the world, it's being very assertive that becomes overly problematic. And when we have a combination of the two, that's where conflict really becomes overly problematic. So theoretically speaking in the group context, conflict, and its goal in, for example, decision-making isn't necessarily a bad thing. The argument is that without conflict, we would fall prey to social influence, right, you and I are engaging in dialogue, let's assume that you come up with an idea that I really don't think is good. Yet, I fall prey to social influence here, just because you, Mason, who's talking and you might have some sort of power over me, I just merely fall prey to your good thinking. But if I really don't agree with it, and I engage in effective discourse that's embedded with conflict, we might actually come up with a better idea as if, as compared to my being reserved. So there's a lot of communication theory out there that not only is conflict good, but there are rhetorical strategies that make conflict even better. And like we're probably going to get to, there are issues linked to the communication of conflict via social media platforms, which I know at least one of your questions is going to tap into here.

Mason Scioneaux

Okay, and so, what has your research in communications theory involved? What have you been able to do to add to what this theory tries to say about the way that human beings communicate via media?

Corey Liberman

A lot of my work has dealt with the areas of public relations, the areas of persuasion, really been interested in persuasion, the role of strategic message design in getting people to change, create or shape attitude, which is from a psychological perspective, the number one predictor of behavior. I have a case book out, a case is a

book that basically introduces different case studies about the role of communication theory in our everyday world. So for example, one of the case studies deals with the role of nonverbal communication. This is just one that came to mind, is the role of nonverbal communication in increasing a waiter's likelihood of getting a better gratuity. So it's using nonverbal expectancy violations theory, which if you've taken a course in communication theory, you've probably heard of, and it's the idea that there are certain things that we can do from a nonverbal perspective to increase the likelihood of getting a better tip after a meal. So, a lot of the theories that I have dealt with have really dealt in the world of persuasion, nonverbal communication, group communication and public relations research. And my argument is that anytime that we deal with theory, anytime that we are working with theory, what we're trying to do is put it to the empirical test, to have it gain additional support. When you take a theory course, one thing that we learn about is what's known as reliability. And reliability is basically saying every time we put this theory to the test, how many times is it reportedly and routinely getting the same results? And obviously, we want it to be very reliable. Out of 100 times, this puts the test how many times out of 100 out of 1000 out of a million? Are we getting the same types of results? So my goal when I put these theories to the test, doing some research, it's hopefully gaining additional support for the already well supported theories that we are studying. So those are really the major areas that I am involved when it comes to the study of communication theory.

Mason Scioneaux

Gotcha. And, what can your work in your research tell us about the interactions between public figures and the media?

Corey Liberman

So, I think that this question can be answered in a myriad of different ways. I think what I will do is approach it from a stakeholder perspective, which is verbiage coming to us from the public relations world, and I think that what the theories and the research and my own research argue is that, especially for public figures, and it's difficult to define what we mean by a public figure, right? We can argue that just by being on Facebook, you are a public figure, right? You're a different public figure as compared to somebody like Trump or Biden, you're different from a public from a public figure as compared to maybe an athlete. But just being, having exposure on social media platforms, produces the very nature of being a public speaker. And I think what the research and theory tell us about the interaction between public figures in the media is that there is a definite relationship between the two. In the world of public relations, one of the first things that I talk about are stakeholder relationships, and stakeholder theory. And the idea is that we have to build very good relationships with the media. We screw around with the media, we do anything to make the media dislike us, we do anything to provide the media with stories where they can work against us. That's what the media want to do. The media want to post and pitch stories that we the public are interested in reading. If we think about it, the news, five o'clock news, it lasts for an hour, we subtract 18 minutes for advertising, we'd have about 42 minutes' worth of news. We have local news, we have regional news, we have national news. Now, unfortunately, most of us want to tune into the news. Yes, we want to see some political things. Yes, we want to see some sports things. If you're anything like me, yes, we want to hear what's going on in the political world, we want to hear about the weather. But we also do like this, I believe it was like the 1970s where this phrase first manifested - infotainment, which is a combination of information, but entertainment. And I don't know really what the independent variable predictive of this is. But people like to see things and it's called the bystander effect. The bystander effect is that we like to see things but we don't like to be involved in it. Right,

we like to see, for example. And hopefully, nobody's getting hurt by this. But we'd like to see news reports of banks being robbed, we'd like to see things where there are human action stories. But at the same time, what we have to realize is that we might become part and parcel of the very stories that they are pitching here, every day news. One of the other arguments that I make for my classes is that when a news channel or a news outlet has 42 minutes, they are providing 42 minutes of what they conceive to be most important for the news public. Right? We are not exposed to every single thing that happened across the world. There are 1000s and 1000s and 1000s and 1000s of things that are news, media-ready, that they're applicable for and are absolutely worthy of news media exposure. But there are interns who are responsible for and people who are working for these media outlets are, what are those stories that are going to be most interesting, most potentially entertaining for the public? And guess what? It's public, you know, things like public opinion, things like public figures who are doing wrong. So, what we have to do is make sure that we as public figures are doing our due diligence and making sure that if we are privately doing things that maybe are morally, ethically, legally wrong, we are not publicizing these because if we do media are going to have an amazingly easy and almost an amazingly fun time pitching these stories and promoting this to the mass public.

Mason Scioneaux

And, likewise, what can you say with communications theory to explain the relationship between the media and public opinion?

Corey Liberman

Well, I think that the media are hugely, hugely important in shaping public opinion. Going back to 1972, I don't - I never make my students memorize names or dates, because I'm not great at that myself. But I think it was 1972. One of the most famous media theories ever developed, is what is called agenda setting theory. And what agenda setting theory? Do not tell us what to think. But the media do tell us what to think about, they set our agenda. And there is, I remember, in college, one independent study that I did, dealt with an organization known as the WTO, the World Trade Organization, and they were involved in a lot of social protests going on in Seattle, Washington. And what the goal of this independent study was really to do exactly the question that you asked. How is it that through with television and newspaper exposure, this was well before the massive colocation of the World Wide Web and our use of social media platforms, how was it that newspapers and radio and the media at the time, how is it that they possibly shape public opinion for the good or the bad. And my conclusion to that study was that unfortunately, after reading about the protests, the WTO protests, in the newspaper and watching on television, we got very, very little information about what the protests were about. But we got a lot about images, we got a lot about how they were disrupting society, how they were engaged in discourse that was antithetical with societal norms. And it put those who were leaders, those who were media exposed, into a position where they were thinking differently about the protesters, not about the issues themselves. So I think this puts a very, I think this provides a really good example of how the media shape public opinion. And it had nothing at all to do with the issues brought forth by the protesters, but rather how it was that the protesters were dressed, the anarchy manifested by the protesters. And I think that the quick answer to your question is that the media absolutely have the opportunity of shaping public opinion. You know, if you've taken media classes, we know that the way that Fox media comes to shape public opinion, in terms of politics, is much different from something like NBC. We come to think differently because of the way that they engage in different message-framing tactics. So if I were to be asked, Do I think the media come to shape public opinion? The answer is absolutely, yes. I think it would take us two hours here to explicate

what specifically they do to shape it, and what are the effects of such shaping of public opinion? But yes, there's absolutely not only a correlation between the two, right? There's a difference between correlation and causation. Correlation means the two are related. Causation means that one causes the other. I would go so far as to say not only are they correlated, but they are also causal, that the media do cause public opinion, not only are they both related.

Mason Scioneaux

Right. And so, can communications theory offer an explanation about how inflammatory comments or scandalous actions like these types of controversies, especially those that may be perceived as racial? Can it offer how they are perceived and reported on by the media, and how the media influences public reaction about those comments and actions, whether it is to make the reaction more severe, I guess, to say.

Corey Liberman

And again, this absolutely goes back to my argument earlier that I would argue that, I would say that not only is the relationship correlational, but it is causal. You know, we put on any sort of media channel today. Whether we're watching television, we are reading a newspaper, we are reading a news magazine, we go on to Facebook feeds we go and read Twitter, we know that we are living in an age and a day where there are millions of initiatives that are dealing with anti-racism and pro-diversity, whether it has to do with black lives matter. I was just involved in a Zoom yesterday about an organization known as BAAAD. I believe that it stands for the Bronx Academy of African American dancers. And it is an all Hispanic, African American gay dance academy. And they began in the 1980s. And the entire Zoom meeting was all about this culture, who has received public outlash even today, in over the last 20 years about its initiatives, about its mission. And really one of the main arguments was that media exposure and media coverage that both shapes public opinion, but also creates it. And I think that there's a bi-reciprocal relationship here, where it's kind of like our attitudes are produced on media, right, especially with the introduction of our mass ability to go online and post things. But also, those very postings then are shaped and recreated by the media outlets that then cover them. Right. So the bi-reciprocal relationship here is that I think that it's the racial issues that promotes public reaction. And that public reaction that in turn gets media exposure. But I think that that media exposure that perpetuates and then reshapes the very ideas that are posted, that whether or not the media then reshape them and re-cultivate them and recreate them, I think is up for debate. I think that largely they do and largely they can. And there are a lot of media, a lot of media scholars out there, there's an area called media ecology. I'm not sure if you've heard of this, but media ecologists studied this very idea. And they would argue that there are much more right wing versus left wing media industries, media channels, media platforms, where they would argue that not only are these public perceptions or public reactions, as you call it, not only are these highlighted and underscored, but these media platforms, these media outlets, purposefully alter them and try to create a change in discourse and dialogue, especially if they see a best fit for their viewers and from their vantage point.

Mason Scioneaux

And so, keeping all that in mind, can communications theory give insight into the rapidly developing cultural phenomenon known as cancel culture.

Corey Liberman

Absolutely. And cancel culture, which is, you know, really this idea of kind of like, you know, mass ostracism on behalf of those who, for a myriad of reasons, right, there are 100 independent variables predictive of this, it's much more likely in our online mediated environment, because we have such easier efficient access to not only postings, but also to read and respond to things. Yeah, like we become, if we think about 20 years ago, we didn't have access to become a media producer, a media editor, a media disseminator. But now with our ability to not only post but to respond, we become, you know, we have an opportunity of adopting the seeds of those in the media industries, so to say. And as a result, I think that absolutely the communication theories about which we have been speaking, I think that they have helped shape and almost yet develop this canceled culture. Absolutely.

Mason Scioneaux

And so, what do you perceive to be the effects of cancel culture on society within that framework? And then, would you regard the new prevalence of cancel culture that, you know, it's a new thing, would you regard it as something that's dangerous to our society?

Corey Liberman

So I think that, and this was after you had sent me your questions, because I knew about cancel culture, I didn't know enough about it. From the literature that I read, a lot of people who have been studying it are saying that while the term cancel culture is a little bit new, the idea of cancel culture is not so new. And if we think about things that have happened in the, you know, the 60s and 70s, the 80s, and 90s, in the world of politics, in the world of business, in the world of sports, again, I'm using sports because I'm a huge sports fan. This, this idea of being ostracized has always been there, right? If, if a sports figure did something, if a political figure did something, they were being ostracized, ostracized by society at large. It's the idea that these social media platforms have made it so much easier to become publicized, and it's become so much easier to get people in the cancel culture spotlight as a result of the publicity that comes as an effect of the platforms that in the marketing world are called the Big Three, right, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. It's just so easy for people to read and potentially even misread the posts that are either intentional or potentially unintentional on behalf of the sender. So, I don't necessarily think that cancel culture is necessarily new. And I think that I would argue, yes, it's a dangerous thing, but I don't think it's any more dangerous as it was earlier. I think that it's just more likely and it probably has more implications, because so many more people are exposed to it as compared to years and decades past.

Mason Scioneaux

So, would you then say that social media has exacerbated the effects of it?

Corey Liberman

Absolutely. A beautiful way of saying it is that it's always existed, it is that yes, social media has exacerbated not only its existence, but both its implications on both the perpetuator of the social media content, and also the

target of it, because those who are now the, you know, the initiator of the cancel culture are also gaining exposure as the very target. Right? If we go back to the example that you had given me of Ed Meek, who was the Ole Miss donor, those women and the administrators at Ole Miss, they are getting as much media exposure as this donor was, right, whose name is no longer now linked to the journalism program at Ole Miss. And I don't think that that is a good thing, right? That's probably something that is desired by some, some people will want to engage in the social ostracism, ostracizing of other people just to get their name linked to this. I think that's where the danger resides. But I think that your example there was perfectly and beautifully worded, in that it kind of exacerbates social media to exacerbate this canceled culture. Absolutely.

Mason Scioneaux

So, what then can we say about how social media factors, I guess, more specifically, into how these controversial statements are received by the public, when they come from public figures, people who are known to a wider audience?

Corey Liberman

Yeah, this really goes back 2500 years to Aristotle, Aristotle is considered to be the father of communication, who argued that if we're going to be persuasive agents, if we're going to get people to think differently in the worlds of things like politics, and law, and government and history, we have to pay attention to three things: the source, the receiver and the message. And I think what becomes most important here, especially when you bring forth the idea of public figures, is we have to remember that we have to take onus over the messages that we are sending, whether we are private figures or whether we are public figures, and it becomes much more important for public figures. And again, I started about 20 minutes ago saying it's very difficult to define what a public figure is, just because we are on social media platforms. And because you are Google-able, you become a public figure. But going back to Aristotle, and Aristotle's word ethos, e-t-h-o-s, is defined as somebody who has sourced credibility. And if we link this back to something like persuasion, if I want to get you to think differently about a brand of toothpaste, or if I want you to become an organ donor, or if I want you to buy a new television, one thing that you have to think about here is not only the product, or the service itself, or the process itself when it comes to organ donation, but it also has to be coming from a reputable source, right? You want the television being sold by somebody who knows about electronics, you want the organ donation campaign from somebody who knows about health, who either has had the organ donated, or who knows about organ donation from a medical perspective. And that's the argument that I would make about any public figure, is that it has to do with source recognition and source credibility. And again, what communication theory would say here about how it is that social media factors into as you say, the reception of controversial statements, it's public figures that have to recognize that they are considered to be reputable, and they are considered to be credible, and that people know them. And they have to be wary of the statements that they make, you know, it doesn't matter if you are a pro-Trump or an anti-Trump supporter, you know, you have to realize that either way, a lot of the statements that he says, are putting him at risk for social ostracism, and for social ostracism here, linking that to cancel culture. And it has everything to do with inflammatory statements and the role that the media play in triggering this.

Mason Scioneaux

And do you think that there's something inherent about social media itself that triggers both the inflammatory statements from people we consider to be public figures, and then the volatile and sometimes violent reactions to those statements on social media?

Corey Liberman

Yes, and I would, I would say, although this is probably a very basic answer, I would say, ease of access. I think it's just easier. It's more efficient. And I think that while most people, most, and I would say that this is the difference between somebody who has taken a course in something like media literacy versus those who haven't. And in fact, at my home institution, we are redesigning our curriculum and we are probably going to mandate that all students in our Gen Ed are required to take a course called 'media literacy.' Now whether or not media literacy incorporates something like you have to know that you are responsible for what it is that you post. Some of my faculty, I know, are gonna say, well, that's just an obvious thing, right? Everybody knows that. But what we know by looking at many of the examples of cancel culture is that everybody doesn't know this. And I would say that the ease of access is, you know, makes an understanding of the responsibility that we have over our words, and our actions are even more important in our social media saturated world today. And again, using examples of the political world, of the sports world again, you know, things happen in the sports world, especially when it comes to two years ago, when, when as professional athletes weren't rising for opening ceremonies, the question becomes when people are posting all the time about this, that has recourse, that has negative ramifications. And when we think about such inflammatory statements, again, I would say, yes, this has been highlighted as a result of social media. But what particularly about the social media? It's the ease of access, it's the ease of doing so. And what people would probably perceive as not such important or salient ramifications of, you know, I post something that I probably know is not morally, ethically good. And what's the worst that happens? Somebody posts that they don't like it. And then I should be ashamed of myself. And this one for a lot of people who are going to be the source of the original post, that's exactly what they want. They want this inflammation to become inflammatory. They want it to be the source of dissent and disagreement. Now, from everything that I've read, and from a lot of research that I have done, the thing that happens over email, the things that happen over social media platforms, are so amazingly disconnected from that that is going to happen face-to-face, just because we have, you know, an increased likelihood of voicing opinions on various media platforms, because we're never going to really see these people, right, there's a difference between mediated voice and face-to-face co-located voice. And I think that that is where the media really worsen, or, as you say, highlight the importance and just a quantitative amount of inflammatory statements.

Mason Scioneaux

And so, with that in mind, where can we go from here as a society to do better in terms of trying to reduce both the inflammatory comments and the inflammatory reactions on social media? Whether that means trying to promote more civility? Or another way? is there is there a solution that we can even attempt to put into motion?

Corey Liberman

I mean, that in and of itself is a thesis topic, Mason. You know, we obviously we need to increase civility, how we do it is another story. Right? If we go back to my original definition of theory being the what, how, when, why, it's kind of like description, explanation and prediction. I think we know the what and the when, I'm not sure we know what you know, the one ingredient that we don't know, from a theoretical perspective, here is how. We need more civility? Yes. Do we know why Yes? Do we know when? Yes. We probably don't really know how. Do we need more regulation from a social media perspective? Yes. Do we need the very initiators and creators, those who are promoting Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and the reason I'm using those three, I know there are many other social media platforms, because I'm so interested in PR and marketing, those are considered to be the Big Three and the three most popular, I think it would be very advantageous for those who created and those who have marketed them to come out with public service announcements about you know, what, we are probably, we are unfortunately never going to live in a unanimously civil society. In the best of all worlds, yes, that's what we would hope for. But a second solution to this is putting regulations on social media, right, that maybe we can't post everything, where anybody in every single platform is exposed to all of this. You know, I have two kids, daughter who's 10 and a son who's six, and they spend much of their free time when they are not doing sports and when they're not in school on Tik Tok, and even Tik Tok now is perpetuating ideas that are political in nature, that are moral in nature, that are ethical in nature, and whether and to what extent there needs to be guidelines, whether or not there really need to be legal regulations for this, I think that there has to be, you know if we think about the amount of unrest and the amount of unrule that is coming as a result of online communication that is geared toward perpetuating things that are, as you say, inflammatory. We need to do something about it. And this, you know, this question, I think, extends a little bit beyond the nature of my scholarship and about what I know about, you know, media regulation and media policy. My short answer to your question is, yes, there needs to be something done about, yes, the civility of society, yes, about the policy on behalf of these platforms. And also, I think public service announcements, public statements on behalf of those who are not only minority owners here, but also majority owners of these platforms. And again, minority, here I'm not talking about racial or diversity, I'm talking about minorities in terms of those who have financial investments in these companies. We need public spokespeople who are coming out saying, 'we need to end this.' And if we're not ending it, we're going to have some sort of regulatory response to this, so that this sort of mediated digression, and this sort of mediated hatred that starts to end.

Mason Scioneaux

Do you think that the media itself perpetuates the problems that we're talking about with social media, when it highlights the worst of social media, like those inflammatory comments, because there's a lot of news coverage where tweets that have heated language are shared in news stories and in news articles, to kind of show some of the different opinions and key aspects of stories? But do you think that promoting these things that we would maybe view as the more negative side of social media is actually making the problem worse?

Corey Liberman

I do. And then the question becomes, is it the chicken or the egg? Is it the social media platforms that are providing traditional media outlets for food for thought? Or is it the media, traditional media outlets who are then providing the social media posters, the food for thought and the genesis for response and reaction? Right,

we would have to do timestamps there to find out really, when we think about the chicken or the egg, oftentimes, that's kind of a philosophical question where there is no answer. We probably could come up with an answer here, if we did have timestamps, right. If we know that CNN came out with a story or Fox comes out with a story or CBS comes out with a story, and then 10 minutes later, we find out that there is a public reaction to it, versus if there's a public reaction to something and then the news media get a hold of it, then we know which came first. But I think that likely, it's the traditional media who are probably more to blame than the American, than the mass world public here. So yes, I do think that they are, I wouldn't say that they are the entire problem. Again, I think that the problem rests, as you said, in terms of kind of our mass incivility as a global society. But I think that really, the traditional media are at least part of the cause. And again, what do we do about this? We can't, we can't stop the media from saying what they say. And this also does put into question that 1972 theory, which says that the media don't tell us what to think, but they tell us what to think about. It really does start to question, do they tell us what to think about? Right? It's not only that they're setting our agenda, it's not that they're telling us to think about politics, they're not telling us to think about global warming, they're not telling us to think about the economy, they're not telling us to think about education. They are really framing for us how we should think about it. And as a result, I think that we do need to invest some additional communication theory and communication research into understanding this mutual link between exposure to what we might call, or I think maybe you call, if not, I'm calling it that - traditional media outlet - and the role that it has in perpetuating the sentiments that are then ultimately published on social media platforms.

Mason Scioneaux

And we talked a lot about who exactly is considered a public person, you know, someone in public, but do you think that statements made on social media by limited celebrities, and by this, I'm kind of keeping Dr. Meek in mind, somebody who is known, maybe within a locale, and maybe has high profile within that locale, but not necessarily regionally or nationally, and maybe they aren't the biggest celebrity out there. But when they like, with the Facebook post in question here with the Meek situation, should we treat those public, those statements as public statements from public officials? Obviously, public officials, as we've talked about, can be understood in many different ways. But should those statements be understood and scrutinized in the same way we would from, say, a politician or a national celebrity?

Corey Liberman

I would say absolutely. And again, I think that, you know, let's assume that you or I came out with a public statement about our institutions. We become public figures, it might very well be that, and I had never heard of this man until you brought it to my attention. And then I did research about it, but let's assume that you or I said something incriminating about our institution, and linked it, especially in 2020, to issues linked to racism, inclusivity, diversity, you and I would then become public figures. Nobody may have ever heard of you in New Jersey, and maybe nobody ever heard of me in Mississippi. Nobody has, I promise, heard of me in Mississippi. But guess what, we as a result of our statements become public figures, right? It used to be, without social media, that we would have to become a public figure by becoming, by doing something to put us in the eye of the public. And now that again, we have social media, social media here becomes the independent variable predictive of mass exposure, and it makes it more effective or efficient, just easier to do. So I think that yeah, somebody like this gentleman, is somebody that yes, is a public figure and somebody whose statements we need to take as seriously as somebody who would be considered a quote unquote,

celebrity or a quote unquote, political figure or a quote unquote, economic figure. And we would have to take it, yes, just as seriously, because I think it's not the figure that matters here, it's the message and the implications that it has.

Mason Scioneaux

And in that same vein, you know, with your research, have you been able to develop maybe a theory about whether in situations of, of much public scrutiny as with this Ed Meek case, is it good, like when a public figure makes a statement like this, and they get a lot of public backlash, has it usually benefited the person to issue a public apology? Or is it better to either act like it doesn't, act like it hasn't happened, or to stand firm in your word, what has research shown in that regard?

Corey Liberman

So now we're entering into an area called crisis communication, which is again, an area that I am pretty well-versed in. There are two theories that are predominant within that area, one of which was developed by a communication scholar known as William Benoit. And his theory is called image restoration theory. And in it, he argues that there are a multitude of different strategies after a crisis emerges. And this was a crisis, right? We know that this was a crisis, he posted something about these two women after a football game at 2 a.m. And there are crisis responses and there are crisis responses on both the target and the source, right. So it was not only Meek who responded, but it was also Ole Miss who responded. Now, from image restoration theory, there are, the strategies are what are known as denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. So, as you can assume denial is basically saying that nothing happened, it wasn't my fault, or it was somebody else's fault. Evading responsibility is basically, we are trying to evade the responsibility all together. You know, maybe it happened, but I have an excuse for why it happened. Corrective action is basically saying, look, it was my fault, but I want to do something in order to correct the problem. And then mortification is the idea that I am completely admitting responsibility. I'm asking for your forgiveness. What I believe that Meek did was engaged in the fifth strategy, which is called reducing offensiveness. And there was a particular claim by Benoit's within reducing offense that is called transcendence. And I will quote from Benoit's article, he said that reducing offensiveness through transcendence argues that quote, 'The Act is placed in a broad context to place it in a different, less offensive frame of reference.' And I think that that's exactly what he did. He quotes on his on his Twitter, I guess, 'I apologize to those offended by my post, my intent was to point out we have a problem in the Grove and on the Oxford square, a 3% decline in enrollment is nothing compared to what we will see if this continues, and real estate values will plummet as real tax revenue.' So, he wasn't saying that I didn't do anything, what he was doing is he was basically shifting the blame. He was saying to himself, a lot of it was in a broader context. And, you know, I didn't mean to say anything that was considered to be racist or anti-diversity. The second theory, which was produced by Timothy Coombs is called situational crisis communication theory. And he mentions three things that are linked to what are called bolstering. He said one thing is what we call reminder, which is to tell the stakeholders about the past good works of the organization. A second, which is called ingratiation where the crisis manager praises stakeholders and or reminds them of past good work by the organization. And the third is what's called victimage where crisis managers remind the stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too. And I think that this is what Ole Miss did. There was a public statement that was signed by, I believe, four of your administrators, many deans who are saying, look, we played no role in what this gentleman did or said, and we are not linked to him, we are going to take his name

off of the building of Journalism and Communication or journalism and whatever the other field is here. So, I think that both the organization and Meek himself, I do not think that would Meek did was an effective crisis response or crisis management strategy. I think, in fact, it probably did more harm than good, as you asked, because he didn't come out with an apology, he did not say, 'I apologize to these two specific women, in no way, shape or form did my sentiments mean to harm them,' it should have been much more directed, it should have been more specific about what the link between his statements were and the rationale for what he may have caused in terms of those two women. But I think that the strategy on behalf of Ole Miss was pretty effective. It was done in a very timely manner within about 24 hours of hearing about the case and hearing about the responses of those two young women. And I think that really what they did was very well aligned with situational crisis communication theory, which has a huge reliability coefficient. Again, one thing on which we base the efficacy of a theory is how many times out of 100 is this theory supported. It has well over a 95% coefficient, which means that of every time it's put to the test, more than 95% of the time, it is supported. So we know that this theory is very, very useful and very reliable. And whether they knew to use this theory is beyond my knowledge, but they did use what was at the very heart of this theory. And they responded, epic efficaciously, they responded efficiently. And they use one of the strategies put forward by Coombs in his theory, so they said, 'Look, you know what, we are a victim here, we do not support anything linked to his sentiments. He is no longer linked to the community, even though he has donated millions of dollars to the school.' So yes, I think that in some ways, a public response to recreate a damaged image can be effective, like the Ole Miss reaction, but I also think that it can be misleading, misconstrued, and ultimately more problematic, as I think was manifested by the public reaction and public response by Meek himself.

Mason Scioneaux

In evaluating the public reaction to Meek's apology, or his statements after the fact, you know, whatever, we should label them here, what can this theory that that you just explained, say about, like, could there have been a scenario in which Meek would have made more corrective statements and maybe reduced the negative effects that his original statements played on his image and his image within the university? Could you see a situation in which he could have basically righted his wrongs and perhaps kept his name on the school of journalism's building and kept his ties with the university, or do you believe that the original statements were severe enough that nothing he could have said or done, could have, could have corrected what he did?

Corey Liberman

Yeah, going back to what I had said about why I thought his response was probably ineffective. He really needed to explain a little bit more outside of the nature of, I'm just looking back at the quote here, in addition to, I think that a lot of the backlash came, because he was linking his statement to the declination in enrollment and the link to real estate, it really had nothing to do with education. And if we link his statement back to an apology, in reading it over 5, 6, 7 times, I didn't really see anything apologetic about it. And if we think about the communication of apology, we have to not only see that there was an apology, but also a rationalization behind the apology. Right? Just in general, outside of the organizational world, when we've wronged somebody, we know that people, you know, we say I'm sorry, but what are you sorry about? Right? Do you know what you caused here, do you know what you created? There was nothing that would link itself to issues of diversity, issues of non-inclusivity, issues of racism, there was nothing to note here, that other than saying I'm sorry, he knows what he was sorry about, how and who he ultimately damaged. Crisis communication is a lot about damage control. He didn't know who he damaged, why they damaged them and what the lasting

effects were going to be. I think that a lot about what needed to happen there, was more inclusion about the role that he played in this, what he can now do, what he is as a donor is now going to do as a result of his apology, and really, ultimately, how and why this event caused concern that ultimately blew up on the social media platforms. Those are the three things that I would say that he really needed to know about effective crisis communication in order to, to make this more effective for him. In the end, I think that it would have, it probably would have culminated in the same effect on behalf of Ole Miss. But I think that if we were to analyze it from a crisis communications perspective, it would have been a little bit more strategic for him to have enacted those three strategies.

Mason Scioneaux

And finally, keeping everything we've discussed in mind today, what do you see as the most prevalent issue in communications as a whole? And where do we go from here, basically, just talking about all the things we've discussed about media's coverage, on comments on social media, and on statements from people themselves, and just the role that social media is playing in society? What do you think is the biggest issue in that? And then how can we proceed in a constructive way from where we are now?

Corey Liberman

I think that in ending here, my biggest recommendation to both practitioners, those who communicate, which is everybody, and theorists, and researchers, is to is to really underscore and understand and highlight that, while the media provide us with a new platform to disseminate our messages, we have to remember that our messages are always going to be impactful. Right, that they are going to impact people the same as they would impact us if we were at a party in a room talking. And I think that people think of it, as you know, back in college, I remember the metaphor that was called beer muscles. Right? You know, that is?

Mason Scioneaux

I do not.

Corey Liberman

Okay, so beer muscles was the idea that, it was kind of like when you went to a fraternity party, the more you drank, the more likely you were to think that you could get into a fight, and you know, that you could you could beat up anybody. Right? It was just the analogy of beer muscles, right, that the more intoxicated you were with alcohol, the stronger you became, and you could take on the captain of the football team. Well, I think there's something to be said about that metaphor, linking itself to social media, is that we think that we can say anything about anybody to whomever, and it's just going to, it's not going to affect people. And the question becomes, and if we were to ask people this on a survey, when it comes to again, political issues, whether anything that becomes rife with the opportunity for debate, as you called it earlier, conflict, right. And as we know, today, any discussion can prompt conflict. What we have to remember is that anytime we talk about anything that has the opportunity of producing conflict, we have to be wary of how we are going to post this online. And if we are going to talk about something that has the opportunity of conflict, let's make sure

that the same things we would say to a person who is sitting next to us are the same things that we are going to say on social media. We have to realize that social media are not giving us those, again, that analogy of beer muscles, it's not going to give us those media muscles, right? It's just giving us a way of communicating it to people that we wouldn't have access to otherwise. You know, the key takeaway here from this last question is, let us be ethical, let us be moral, let us just be cognizant of the fact that our words mean something that our words matter, and that our words are shaped by other people, our words shape other people. This goes back to a bi-reciprocal relationship that I mentioned earlier, that words come to shape attitudes, but attitudes also come to shape words. And I think that the way that I will end this is just, you know, we need a theory of cognizance, a theory of awareness, that what we post on social media have huge impacts on relationships, on organizations, again, on reputation, on reputation management, on images. And I think that it's really all about, again, social media literacy and understanding how the messages of yesteryear are still being employed today. And the only thing that is different are the mediums through which we are communicating these messages.

Appendix C: Atish Baidya Interview

Atish Baidya

I came up after that. And so, and then, you know, so I know sort of that sort of thing, but I don't know, like, I don't know how the DM would've covered it or, or what conversations were happening with regards to that. I, you know, I do know some things about you know, we involving Hotty Toddy and you know, that kind of stuff. So I have I've had bits and pieces here and there, you know, but I don't like, you know, wasn't in the room when conversations were happening.

Mason Scioneaux

Okay. And I kind of, I mean, I had that in mind when I asked to speak with you about it, because of, really, I think it's a good thing just to talk about some of these things in general. Because there's a lot of general stuff that I can ask you about, like, like, for example, I wrote some questions that I can ask you and try to keep it less specific about that and more about, you know, you being an advisor for student media in general. So, like, when you advise the SMC and the DM, what is your approach to controversies on campus that student media has to cover?

Atish Baidya

I mean, I guess, yeah, I mean, I you just want you want that students that you're advising the young journalists that you're advising to do their job, you know, and so you're there to support them in doing that job. And helping them and, you know, and so, what does that look like? You know, what does that mean to like, support them in doing their job. I mean, that mean, that thing that depends on the relationship you have with the staff, it depends on the situation in terms of the context of the situation that you're dealing with. And then it depends on, you know, the skill set and level of experience of the staff. So supporting can mean a variety of different things. It can be just encouraging them, because you have a really strong staff with a really great sliver of news judgment and, and clear direction. And so you just sort of need to encourage them a little bit. He can, he can be talking through issues, or questions that they may have, or approaches or how to do things, that that's what they want and are asking for. It can be being the voice in the room to make sure that they're staying, you know, on the straight and narrow or so to speak in terms of making sure that you're, you're sticking to journalism, they're not overstepping into areas that are unethical or problematic. That may, they may not know that is that way, because they don't have they're still learning right - it's a learning experience. And so they don't have the experience to know, you don't know what you don't know. So it can be a variety, it can be any of those things, depending on all the different variables, but you're there to support them into for them to do they're there to support them in whatever way you need to in terms of those variables. But with the goal of allowing them to practice good journalism.

Mason Scioneaux

Well, like when you were talking about news direction there and encouragement, have there been times when you've either had to pull back the reins on a certain story, or maybe give them encouragement for them to go in a certain direction, when, depending on what their, what editors and journalists, like their intentions have been on a certain issue or on a certain story?

Atish Baidya

I can't speak I can't speak to that. Because prior to this job, you know, I wasn't an advisor, I was more of an editor. So, I got to make the decisions and tell them tell the students what to do. So, this job is a little different than my previous job in which my previous job, I still had editorial control. And I had editorial decision-making power and the students were sort of interns and it was a professional station. And we had, you know, an audience, you know, and so we had to we were our editorial perspective what I mean, the students were there to help support the professionals and the mission of the professional station but they didn't have autonomy to make their own editorial decisions themselves. And this job is different in which the students have their editorial independence, so I do just advise, and they can tell me to shove it. Or they can, you know, listen to my advice, or somewhere in between.

Mason Scioneaux

Gotcha. Um, well, with that, do you think that student media has an obligation in any situation to either preserve or protect the university's image with how they cover a certain story that can be damaging to that image?

Atish Baidya

No.

Mason Scioneaux

Flat out? No?

Atish Baidya

Nope. I mean, that could be - Because I say no, and this is my personal opinion, you know, my personal opinion and speaking personally for me, is I don't believe that that is, what student media is, is there for. Now, that being said, of course, it is a very tricky position, right? Because you are technically a university employee, you are employed by a university, which pays your salary. And you know, so you do want on one level, you want the university to look good, because for a variety of reasons. But sort of that, I guess, but here's the thing, though, the argument that so that's all framed in a way it's framed in a perspective of sort of, the it's framed in a perspective of 'university as a business,' and the 'university as a company,' as a 'corporation,' and not as a place of education and learning. So that's, that's, that's sort of when you get down to it, that's sort of the conflict that's happening there that sort of like frit that's sparked sort of all of this conversation in terms of the frame, how you're framing the problem framing the issues, like, oh, should student media, you know, not report on controversial things, make the university look bad? Well, you're in that frame of mind, you don't want the university look bad, because it costs prospective students, when you have the reputation, students want to come here, and all that stuff is needed for the business side of things, the money for the tuition. Right, what you know, that's, that's what that's why as the university's reputation of higher education, institutions,

reputation is so important nowadays, is because it's become a business and it has a lot of money involved, and it's become corporatized. If you take it out of that frame, and you say, look, you make the argument that students learning how to do their job, and students practicing their craft, which they are coming to this institution to learn, and do and report on their community. We should applaud and encourage and support that regardless of if it makes the university look bad, because they're doing their jobs. And if this is a place of higher education, and learning and growth and all that stuff, then the students doing their jobs in that learning and doing the process of reporting all that stuff, is what they're here for. So why would you say, oh, excuse me? Why would you tamper that down? Try to control that trying, you know, whatever, whatever and manage that. And then from a PR perspective, why would you do that? If that's part of the reason they're here for? So it's a, it's sort of like, there's this there's this thinking this, this, like, it's either this or it's not? It can't be both? It can be both. But the thinking is that it can't be both. And that's what we get. That's where that's where the tension comes from. It can be both. Yeah, it absolutely has to be both. If we want, we were talking about the university as a community, the university as a sort of its own little mini society, and all the different little parts of Student Media Center and all these little parts that make up the community that it's a microcosm of larger society in a certain kind of way, but closed off in certain kind of way, a safe space for all that learning and growing things to happen. So all of those things have to happen to but if the argument is it's going to be you know, damage the school's reputation, then you're not, then then I argue that people who make that argument or can't embrace the or aren't Embracing the, the both-ness or the nuance in that that, and that they're just looking at it and thinking about it from a business perspective. And I fundamentally disagree with that. I don't think colleges and universities and institutions of higher education should be about the money 100%. I mean, it's it. But at the same time, I'm not naive. It's the world we live in. It's the water that surrounds us? So yes, it is considerations, but how do we temper some of that business, corporate mindset, with something nobler and of higher purpose?

Mason Scioneaux

Has that debate been a point of contention where people want to see student media on campus serve as more of a PR role than you think it should? Or then really should?

Atish Baidya

I can't speak to that debate here on this campus, I've only been here since February. So, I can't speak situationally, specifically to the University of Mississippi. I will say just sort of like, as I've started to immerse myself more in sort of student media, the student media world and student media advising, I've seen, you know, online, you know, different listservs and stuff that I've been part of, there is a there is sort of seems to be or some call it, media advisors have been vocal about, they're saying there is sort of a, there seems to be some sort of trend towards that. And I think that you do sort of see this trend towards talking about freedom of the press, and freedom of speech and stuff on college campuses. And what is allowed and what's not allowed on set, you do see that, that that push from the university and administrative side of thing. And this is, again, this is not me, this is not deep research on my part, this is sort of like observations and readings and sort of just like, it's kind of like, kind of touching, getting the pulse of what's going on, you do see that kind of perspective. Again, from the business mindset, the administrators don't want any bad PR. So they're trying to do what they can to control all of the messaging that's coming from the campus. And they're encroaching upon or trying to push that sort of, like perspective on student media and on student media, and in just sort of like press and

speech policies, I think across the board on campus, you're seeing more of that, here lately. It's becoming more of an issue. You know, than one before I think.

Mason Scioneaux

Do you think here at the university, that previous, you know, campus controversy, I guess what we can call it has caused that like, streamlining of content from, like, university administration, because I know, in my own experience, and I'm sure you can attest to this, like when the university basically moved to a policy, where the only person who would talk would be, you know, Rod, the PR guy. Do you think that that move was a result of controversies like the Meek thing where they were trying to save face for any future things that happened?

Atish Baidya

I don't think - No, I don't think that - I can't again, I, broadly looking at, this is sort of my perspective looking in, I don't think you can say that. And I and I don't know what, you know, I don't know, I'm not in a lot of these rooms when these conversations may have been happening. So, I can't talk about people's thinking. I can say from my perspective that, I believe I mean, I believe that I don't think that that the Ed Meek situation, was the sort of like the impetus for the policy change that we we've seen, you know, that we dealt with, like last year, or earlier this semester. Was it earlier this semester?

Mason Scioneaux

I think, I think that was earlier.

Atish Baidya

Or I'm sorry, earlier this year, in the spring semester, I think. Yeah, I think yeah. I don't think that - seems like a lifetime ago... Anyway, I don't think that you can say that, you know, like a plus b equals C. I think I think that that policy was probably a long time coming. Again, just given the climate of what's given the climate of sort of All of that stuff, and how, and again, depends on universities. But again, I would say given that more business mindset, sort of running a university, as a business, as a corporation, that it's a combination of that that's been happening for the past, since probably the 80s, is actually when that started happening, it's been a slow march towards that. And so what you're seeing is sort of like, a combination of all of that stuff. And, and then on top of that, I would argue that also with sort of the advent of the technology, and the advent of social media, etc., you know, the technology, there is even more of a way for universities to, to message, to control the message themselves and to produce media themselves. So, this democratization of sort of like media and producing media, through social media and all that stuff, and technology getting cheaper and all that stuff, you know, universities are able to, to, to make their own media now. And so they rely, they don't need to rely on you know, the press as much anymore to get their message out. And so that's part of it. So now that they can control the message themselves. This is, again, from my reading of the research, now they control, make - produce a bunch of stuff and market themselves in a certain kind of way they weren't able to do before, and outreach, as you know, as you know, just on their own, like, for example, you know, President Donald Trump in his tweets, right, he just takes, he can just take his message out there publicly on Twitter, and gets all this

play - that sort of same dynamic in terms of universities being able to do that means that they also, they see that you can do this, and then they want to control the message even more. And so they can, and so they want to control the things that they can control and it sort of kinda snowballs, I think from there a little bit. So, and on top of that, they want to do that too, because of, again, the corporatization of higher education: it's becoming a business, it's becoming a corporation, there's a lot of money invested in, you got it reputation - all this stuff. And, and because it's a business and you're trying to attract certain people, you have to sort of like, lowest common denominator, you can't, you can't - Look. Universities, I don't think, and you see this - universities, and because I've had this at my old institution, too, and for some reason, and, or maybe it's certain universities or whatever. But maybe it's because I'm in the press in the media and journalism, but like, when a crisis comes up, it seems that universities don't know what the heck they're doing. They, they like shoot themselves in the foot, they just make all these bad decisions, about how to handle the PR, they don't show any kind of backbone or leadership in owning up to whatever, and I don't know what that is, I don't know if that's the business sort of mindset, if that's just poor leadership, if that's not enough smart people making the decisions, but they seem to like, and it's just like, reactive as opposed to responsive, never in front of an issue, always behind the issue or the controversy. And just like making the just, like why are you doing this, and then it's like, and also you probably have a bunch of experts, because you have like a communication school, all that stuff, people who study this stuff, I could probably advise you better. And yet, it seems you're making like these dumb, like shooting, you know, like just not smart decisions. It feels like from a certain, from my perspective, from a certain perspective as a journalist, which maybe it covers me a little bit, and I'm not thinking about part of the equation that other people are saying, but that's my perspective. And it's like, what is that all about? Given sort of, like, what a university is and the expertise that they have at their disposal? What is that really about? I think, again, I think for me, from my reading of it, I think part of it is business again, I'm going to come back to this business model thing, because the lowest common denominator, you can't offend people, you offend certain groups of people, they're not going to come here, right? So you sort of make it as bland and un-offensive and you're not going to take a stand on things, you're not going to be in front of problems, social issues are in a certain kind of way. Because if you are and we see you know, I think some of this, you know, like nope, and given sort of like the media landscape we're in, who knows what kind of crazy backlash is gonna happen? And so you're not going to put your, you're not gonna stick your neck out, the universities aren't going to stick their neck out for things that are arguably probably what would I would say correct or brave or morally right or whatever. They're not going to take those positions, necessarily, because it, it opens them up to so much whatever that could like affect the bottom line, which is money. Yeah. And so, and then it comes - And that's what it really, I think comes down to at the bottom line. We talked - I mean, it comes down to money, because higher ed is a business now and not a place for you to come and learn. It is, I mean, it's both, but the money interests override more largely in an in an outsized way, perhaps, and in ways that we're not even thinking about.

Mason Scioneaux

We're looking at it as a business. You know, I, obviously, you know, as you said, you can see how schools now it's become a big business. And, you know, with any business, when things don't operate in a way that an administration sees eye to eye with, they tend to, you know, cut it off. Is there a fear that as we move forward, not just at Ole Miss, but at other universities across the country that um, you know, in a situation, like at our university, where student media is funded by the university, that we could see administration decrease that funding or even cut journalism programs, not only because of business interest, but also as a way to curb negative reporting?

Atish Baidya

Are you asking me if it's a possibility?

Mason Scioneaux

Yeah, I'm asking, like, I guess, have you - to make it more specific, have you had a fear that the University of Mississippi would ever cut funding, or in any way disrupt student media, because of the way it covered certain things? Or, and I guess on the flip side, do you think that we could see this in the future across the board?

Atish Baidya

I don't have a rational fear, or concern about it, but you know, it's frickin' 2020 and, you know, anything is - anything - if we've learned anything from this year, it's like, pretty much anything can happen. So I mean, can we say it's a possibility? Yeah, of course, we can always say anything, isn't anything and everything is a possibility. Do I, am I worried about it personally? No. But am I speaking from a from a place of like, real information? No. And I have only been here since February. So is it a real possibility? I mean, yes, of course, we could say it's a possibility. Again, everything's a possibility. Do I have a concern about it? No, I don't think that. I don't, I don't, I can't imagine it being - I don't, I can't imagine that happening. Now, that being said, you know, in some listservs, and I'm on into some chatter that I've been hearing through the college advising community and stuff, college advisors' community. I mean, there are some examples of universities where they feel like, college advisors feel like that's happening, they are at universities that actually cut, cut the budget of the student media, and they have taken away money. And, you know, and so I will say this, though: so, my old institution, um, you know, just before I left, you know, we were reporting on, not the students, but both teams were helping, but primarily the professionals in the newsroom, were reporting on some controversial things that are happening at Ohio University. And, you know, we work in a public media station, WOUB public media, which is an NPR and PBS affiliate, though Ohio University owns our operating license. So we were, we were employees of the university. And so, you know, the University runs this, owns the station's operating license. Our budget, for the most part, was very much was very much on, you know, members, donations, all that stuff. So we were sort of financially independent, but still a part a unit of the university. And because of the reporting we were doing, there was a legitimate concern that the university administration might cut the share of the funding that they gave to us or, you know, do something else. And so they, we started putting on our stories, the fact that Ohio University owns our operating license at the bottom of the story, to make it clear that we were part of the university in a certain kind of way, but also I think to protect ourselves that if there was any kind of backlash, or something, we could, you know, by doing that and making it clear that we were part of the university, if there was some sort of backlash, you know, there was a clear connection that, maybe possibly could this be backlash for the story, for the coverage that we're doing - the negative coverage on the university. Now, my old boss had that worry. I'm, I didn't. I didn't think, maybe I'm naive, I didn't think it would ever come to that. So, I thought she was being a little paranoid. But you know, that's why she's the boss. And she has to think in those terms, I guess. And so, she did some strategic things just to sort of like protect ourselves a little bit. So yeah, so there are examples, I think out there in college, in the college, media, student media space of colleges, administrators, administrators, not happy with the coverage and making certain moves. I mean, it's not unprecedented. Do I know - but again, I don't have details on how many specific examples, where they were at, etc. But, you know, anything's possible.

Mason Scioneaux

So, earlier this semester, I guess we kind of saw how a student media coverage can draw reaction from the university community. And I think a way in which I mean, I noticed this particularly, I don't know, if you would concur with the level of attention it got, but it was the way, it was two stories that the DM did about the Greek community on campus. And one, one in particular, was the non-compliance with COVID guidelines on rush day and bid day, or whatever. And the other was the story about certain fraternities or sororities not paying their house staffs enough, not paying them a living wage, and them having to take on multiple jobs. And those two stories got a lot of attention, and a lot of backlash on social media and generated a lot of talk in the community and whatnot. And so, you know, with that, do you think that it's safe to say that the coverage that student media does here on campus, and I guess anywhere, can really affect public opinion on certain things? And how the, I guess, like it can create a pretty large public reaction?

Atish Baidya

I mean, I guess it depends on who, I guess it depends on how you define 'public.' But yeah, I mean, yes. I mean, I think that I mean, that's what we, that's all, that's what journalists want, they want their to work to have impact, obviously. And that's why you, that's why journalists, I think, do what they do, you don't do the work because - look, when you're a journalist, and you're reporting on stuff, you're not, it's not puppies and cakes, and rainbows and butterflies. And, you know, most of what news is, is not that, especially hard news and stuff that you need to cover to be informed members of your community or informed members of your country, a good citizen, you need to know what your government's doing, you need to know what's going on in the community, all that stuff. Like, that's not pretty stuff. So who would want to go and like, sort of, like, wade in that kind of muck in a certain kind of way? You're not doing that, just because you enjoy it, you're doing that because you're hoping to make a difference, you know, hoping that your work has impact and you're hoping it, it does something, you know, it contributes to something. What that contribution is, you know, the scale of that contribution, you know, that's a philosophical conversation, you know, like, I could spend hours on end, maybe for another time, but you do want, you do hope that you're contributing to something. This is my opinion. I think what why journalists do, and I'm speaking from personal experience, I think, too. You're hoping you're contributing something and making a difference or having an impact in some kind of way you can measure. You know, before, when I was a young reporter, I was hoping to like, you know, you, you know, a reporter going to do X story and it has Y results - you can really see that impact, right? And that's what we all sort of like, that's like, the fantasy and I'm not going to say fantasy, but like the dream, right? You know, like, Oh, you know, I've gotten older, you realize that that happens once in a lifetime, maybe once in a blue moon, or even depending on what kind of reporter you are. But that maybe there are immeasurable ways, and ways that your stories have impact that you don't know about or will never know about. But you sort of have faith it is happening. And that keeps you going. So yeah, so I think student journalists, students in student media, ones who were studying journalism, they're there because they want, well, they're there to learn. And they're there to also, you know, as they're doing it make an impact on stuff. And as for the public, I mean, I mean, so whoever's, wherever your audience is, it can have a big reaction. But you know, it means, so does it cause a reaction amongst your audience, amongst the public, if you could define the public as your audience? Sure. But also like, depending on what it is, like, look at the Daily Tarheels 'clusterf___' headline that got them viral right, the campus newspaper at Chapel Hill, they had, they used an expletive in their headline and got so much play, right, across, as part of the large part of the conversation about the pandemic and COVID-19 and all that

stuff. This week, it was amplified by the national media. So, there are moments like that. If you want to talk larger, broader, like national conversation, national level public, but you know, I think you have to be in a very special moment, or it has to be a very special situation for that to happen, to reach that level. That makes sense? I don't know.

Mason Scioneaux

Yeah. I guess, branching off of what you said, on the flip side of that, obviously, you know, when, when Ed Meek published that Facebook post that really set off all this, he obviously intended for that to generate some sort of impact. But, you know, he didn't, I guess, realize the unintended negative consequences and backlash he would get from it. So you know, I guess, I don't know what question I could, I'm trying to, to get out of this. But, um, you know, he was somebody who had had PR experience with the university. And, you know, I guess should have had more of an understanding of how that message could have been received by the community. So it's, I'm struggling about what I'm trying to ask you here. But just basically talking about, you know, the impact that his post had is what I'm trying to get at.

Atish Baidya

I mean, so I'll say this. I guess I'll ask the question of 'would that post have had much of an impact, or how much of an impact or what kind of impact would that have had if it wasn't covered by the press?

Mason Scioneaux

Right. And I mean, you know, you have to wonder, and whether, and I mean, maybe it's an obvious answer, the controversy that the post caused was intentional, but the backlash from it was not you know, maybe in an ideal world for Dr. Meek, that post - it creates the same kind of conversation it does, just without any of the personal consequences that he's had to face over the two years since that happened, you know?

Atish Baidya

I mean, I can't speak. I mean, I don't want to speculate on what was in Dr. Meek's heart or his intentions. I don't - I'm not a mind reader. So I don't know what he was thinking when he made that post, or what he was intending or not intending to convey when he made that post. And, I mean, there's so many, very, I mean, you know, there's, I don't know if it's under, I mean, he's a PR professional, yes. But, I mean, how much understanding of social media and how the media landscape has changed since his time, like, I don't, I don't know, his understanding and awareness and, and skill level with that sort of stuff. So you know, but so then, so then the question is, though, if you want to talk about sort of like, his intentions versus what happened or whatnot, then my question is, what is the issue that he was trying to raise? That's it, let's just, let's - what issue he was trying to raise, irregardless of whether he did it, you know, in a good in the best way possible, or the worst way possible, what was the issue that he was trying to raise? Like, you have to you have to interrogate that, you have to question and think about that, and talk about that. That's outside of everything else. To me, all the other stuff is kind of noise. And that is the crux of the question. And that's the crux of the issue. What was, what was, what was the issue that he was trying to, what was, what was he trying to, what point was he

trying to make? And then, whatever the point he was trying to make, what does that say about our society, or culture, you know. It then opens up a whole other box of like, questions asked. And, for me, I think though, that's the job of a journalist, is to sort of explore that and talk about that, and, and report on that and provide information on that - whatever that is. Look, journalists, I believe journalists are sociologists, you know, journalists, are there documenting history, questioning events, digging around, to find the reasons and causes and understanding of why things happen the way they happen, you know, all that stuff. You know, and that's asking and asking through reporting. Hopefully, you know, my opinion, my idealized version of journalism, is you're doing that so the citizens can be better informed and ask themselves, do I want to live in this society that's structured this way that works this way, it operates this way that, has these effects on people? Is this, that and the other? Or do I want to live in a society that operates and is structured differently? You know, that's what reporting and providing information to people, as a journalist, I think is all about. It's holding up in some way, hopefully a lens or a mirror to folks to get them talking and thinking and debating, and in, you know, organizing and fighting, not fighting, like fighting in fighting for cause that kind of stuff.

Mason Scioneaux

Well, you know, you mentioned how important it was that, you know, for us as journalists, that that situation got covered at the level that it did. And so, I guess in that vein, you know, a lot of the saga with that situation, was focused upon administrative reaction with the chancellor at the time condemning the comments, faculty reaction with them condemning the comments, and then also moving to take his name off the school of journalism building. So, do you think that student media can affect administrative decisions within the university? Because obviously, we talked about the flip side of that with how you know how student journalists can create perception about administration. But can student journalists affect administrative decisions because of how things are being covered, and how that coverage is affecting perception in the public, because I mean, you know, when the DM covers something of that magnitude, and, you know, faculty and the Chancellor sees it, and they want to, I guess, for the corporate interests that we talked about earlier, they want to squash the negative reactions that are happening as a result of that coverage. So, can that prompt them to make decisions administratively about what's going on?

Atish Baidya

I mean, hypothetically, yes. Yeah. I mean, I think it can. You know, I mean, but I mean, again, because if you think about it, in the sense that the university campus is sort of a microcosm of larger society, the administration is a government right, in some kind of way. And then the press, the student media is sort of like the press. So you know, you know, you see how the press can influence policy or make changes or spur action or change, through journalism, and through shining a light in the dark places that those in power probably don't want the light shone, or those who have things to hide, right. So, yeah, so hypothetically, yes. I mean, of course, it's, it's, it's something that can happen. I can't speak to, you know, this specific situation about what happened here on campus, and the events and the reactions or responses. But broadly speaking, yes. And I think broadly speaking, right to like, as a student, journalists, you're hoping that, again, as I talked about, journalists want to make an impact or make it contribute to something more than themselves. So that's what you hope for.

Mason Scioneaux

So as a microcosm of larger society, do you see student journalism in the 'overwatch' role in the same way that we see that we see media as an overwatch in, you know, regular society?

Atish Baidya

Yeah. So, broadly speaking, yes. Like, I think that that's something to strive for. Again, recognizing you're learning and you're still, you're learning through the doing. But yes, that's what I think, that's one role for student media is that accountability journalism, as they call it. That's one role for, for student media and for student journalists, to cover their communities, to do that digging and keep the powers that be accountable and in and all that stuff. And but that's just, you know, that's one role. That's one slice of it. That's not all of it. But it's one part of it.

Mason Scioneaux

Do you see, like, I guess, especially in the case of student media, do you think that there's an obligation and I guess well, I guess you can talk about this generally, with any media. But do you think that there's an obligation for editorial boards to portray both sides of an issue? And by that, I mean, with any kind of editorial statements that editors may make on behalf of the entity like the paper or whatnot? Or what kind of opinion pieces they publish and what those say about a particular issue? Do you think that that there should be a, a good faith effort to show more than one, I guess, side or opinion on a certain issue? Or can editors take creative liberties in how they want to portray something to the public?

Atish Baidya

Clarify that last part of that question for me. What do you mean by 'creatively portray' something to the public?

Mason Scioneaux

I said, creative liberties, like, can they can they choose to, to portray an issue to the public in the way that they want to, as opposed to saying, you know, we're gonna try to be as objective as possible and give equal airtime or, you know, airtime or print time to both sides, because that's always a tough issue that that we're having to grapple with as journalists.

Atish Baidya

I, I think that, I think times are changing. I think that this generation of journalists that are in college now, and maybe just starting the careers, view and experience the world a little differently, there's a generational gap. And so you're seeing, you're seeing this kind of play out in certain in certain ways, across student media, what kind of media student media group or organization are we going to be? Are we going to be, quote unquote, old school, where this idea, there is such an idea and value and faith in journalistic objectivity? And in giving both sides of the story, in fairness, fairness in terms of giving, fairness couched in giving both sides of the of the story opportunity, you know, to, you know, to make, to tell their story, I guess, in a certain kind of way, sort of the old kind of, old school way of doing things, versus this newer, sort of more maybe nuanced way of

thinking that recognizes that there is no such thing as true objectivity. We're not - there is no such thing. And that true objectivity is actually manufactured, and actually has roots in racism, and patriarchy and all these other oppressive sorts of things, and in business and capitalism. That, and then if you have a deep understanding of the history of journalism, you could almost argue sort of, overall, journalism, or the media landscape is kind of coming back to where it was before this invention of objectivity. So, so younger journalists are interrogating and questioning the ways of the way things, 'we've always done it this way,' they're questioning that. I think people in their professional industry, certain people are questioning that, and are getting more traction and more visibility in the questionings of those things. Like, these conversations that probably have always been happening. But given the sort of historical time and space we're in now, you know, what's happening with Black Lives Matter, and then the pandemic, and President Trump and the divisiveness in this country and all these kinds of things, and are grappling with the race again, and all this inequity and inequality? Not again, but you know, it's never like, people are quite fundamentally questioning things that they have taken for granted before in a certain kind of way. So there's, there's a rupture, there's this tension in this rupture space. So it's, and you see that manifest, like I know that if you look at, in one paper, NYU, they had a big, little row with their new advisor that has resulted in some drama, allegations of racism and transphobia and all this other stuff. And, you know, young people, younger people, you know, college-age kids aren't putting up with some of the shit anymore, and are calling out some of the shit to use some coarse language. They're calling out some of the stuff now, there's not a tolerance for it. But there's also sort of like an intolerance to tolerance also on the side of the things that, as I see it, sort of, as someone, quote unquote, older. So there's - I know some people are figuring it's a mess. It's just a big old mess. And figuring out and then, so there's that that happened at NYU, and then one paper. I don't remember where, I had the article pulled up a long time ago. Oh, yeah. McAllister - Macalester College, in I don't know, in Minnesota. They decided that their paper would be explicitly anti-racist, anti-something - anti-capitalist and anti-something. They explicitly said that we're going to operate through this lens of anti-racism, anti-capitalism and anti-I don't know. I have to look at this article for more. But they specifically said they're going to operate in the lens, through that lens, and everything that they do, the stories they cover, all that stuff, they're operating in that space, and they're owning that. And it's this staff that decided to own that, own that sort of perspective, you know, commitments to anti-racism, anti-fascism and anti-colonialism as basic standards for professional conduct, at that paper, that they said that these are the tenants we're going to live by. That's, that's not quote unquote, objective, is it? If we think about objectivity, a certain kind of way.

Mason Scioneaux

Do you think that explicitly taking sides or identifying your editorial approach, in that way is constructive for journalism or not a good thing?

Atish Baidya

Again, I don't, I don't, I don't know. I honestly, I don't know. Personally, for me, this is my personal opinion, my personal feelings, as a person of color. And because of my lived experience, and how I understand systems, systems of oppression in this country, I am leaning towards kind of thinking it's pretty cool, actually, because there are lots of, because, because certainly systems of oppression are so engrained in the way that power works and oppression works. It's so engrained into things and so baked into things, that it's there, whether you think it's there or not. And so you actively have to like look at everything critically, look at it, take it apart, look at it, examine it, and see where those things are. So I think that you have to see, if we are to be a better

society, in progress, progress into something better than we are now and to progress and to live in a place that reflects the better sides of our human nature, I think those are things that we have to, I personally believe that those are things we have to do. And I personally believe that journalism is probably a tool for that. Is there a way to do that and be fair and accurate? Yes. There's, there's a difference between objectivity, I believe, and fairness and accuracy. You want to be fair, you want to be accurate. But objectivity as a tenant of objective journalism, objectivity and truth with a capital T. I don't know that, you know, but on the flip side of that coin is because there's, things are so nuanced now, and people see things with the lenses that they wear, you know, we have another we have this grip, where people literally are living in fundamentally two different realities. Because perception is reality for people, right. So we are, we are literally experiencing now where people will see the same thing, will see this, as an example. And you will see it one way and I will see it another way, based on our lived experiences and our perceptions. If we can't agree on certain things, or it's hard to for us to agree on certain things. And that's pretty bad design. The divisiveness is coming from it, and how do you, how do you keep a society together, if we don't agree, this is a pen? You know, right. What are we gonna do with that? So there's that side of the coin. I don't have the, I don't have all the answers. I'm just saying I'm leaning towards that sort of idea because I think that, again, it speaks to my lived experience, and it's it speaks to me, but then I can also see how if someone else had a lived experience, something that I would disagree with may speak to them, and I don't know if I have the, is it my space of time or place or whatever to like, cast moral judgment on that? And is there such a thing? Because I don't know, you know. So now we're getting into, what we're getting really deeply into is sort of like morality and what is good and what is not good? And what is harmful? And what is not harmful? And how do we define those things? And how do we? I don't know. But, so back to this objectivity thing, notice in this journal, this paper, you know, what they're saying: anti-colonialism, anti-racism, anti-fascism. Okay, that's the lenses from which they are operating. And, you know, back before, back in the day, we had very partisan papers. Newspapers were very partisan, they supported different political parties. It wasn't, it was a subscription-based model. So they got the money from subscribers. So you paid for your paper, you know, you listen to or you read what you read. And, you know, and as that sort of like, went away, and, and then I don't remember exactly how it happened. And there's a great podcast, I can point you to if you want to learn more about this, in an entertaining version, but you know, that the business model started to change from that subscription-based model, to advertising. And as you switch to advertising, you had to advertise to everyone, you couldn't, like, couldn't offend people, right? Least common denominator advertising had to be, it had to be, the papers had to not be partisan, to collect the advertising revenue, all that stuff. And so that's when you get this invention of this idea of journalistic objectivity. Fragmentation, unfortunately, through a white man, white man, white straight man's perspective, that became the norm of what was like normal or inoffensive. That the baseline was, because that's, and that's why not, some people argue there's no such thing as true objectivity, because the idea of what was objectively true, or what's the baseline is actually not objective in and of itself, because it, it was made for a white male perspective, that kind of gaze. So then that's why you get the mass advertising and all that stuff. And we operated in that way for a long time. And now we're back to the sort of subscription-based model, again, where people are picking their platforms, based on their politics or whatever, and they're subscribing to them, rather, giving them their money to some degree, you know, depending and so now we're back to that again. And then, as we're back to that, again, we're seeing again, I guess, in some ways, you're seeing papers, or at least, you know, you're seeing outlets or media platforms, or wherever you want to call them now embracing some of their perspective. And branding, selling themselves that way. Right. So it's coming kind of back full circle again. So you know, it's a mess. I don't know, I don't have, I am myself and like working through it myself, to be honest, I don't, I have sort of bits and pieces of the answer. But I don't have an answer that feels complete, or a way of operating that feels complete at this point. But it's, it's things that things would be, people, people are thinking about those things. And I think part of it is a generational change with folks.

Mason Scioneaux

I guess I'll finish it off with this last question. Based on what you just said, would you say that an all-encompassing objectivity is impossible?

Atish Baidya

Yes. I think that as we define objective, again, you can, you can be fair, and you can be accurate. And you can, and you have to do your best to tell all sides. Now, there's not just two sides of the story. There're multiple sides to the story. And usually, and if you're doing your job as a journalist, you're trying to give that more nuanced, understanding and tell all the sides in a really deeply way, the issue. If you want to call that objectivity, okay, we can call that objectivity. But, you know, I don't think - that's the word, that I think we need to change the word because that's not what it is. And that doesn't, that doesn't make sense to me anymore. Or I just think we should change the word. And then also, you know, this idea that journalists have to be objective. We all carry lived experiences, right? Like, we can't not pretend that those exist. And we can't not and then we, you can't also pretend that somehow, if you, like we saw with I think, a Pittsburgh paper, just because you're a black reporter doesn't mean you can't go cover Black Lives Matter movement. I would argue that it makes you more qualified to cover such events, because it's your community and you have a deeper understanding. Now you have to be fair and accurate in your reporting. So, you know, just like, you know, and then then, you know, then they throw us into whole the argument of like, again, the default is a white, is a straight white man, as the objective thing. So that's not, you know, that's not right. We, we all have different experiences that we bring to the table. And, you know, the more you can include those voices, in terms and perspectives, in terms of the people, on your staff, just in general and newsrooms in general, I think it benefits I think you benefit from a diversity of perspectives and experiences. You have to be able to communicate through those differences and perspectives. And that is the difficult work for everyone is, you know, just in general. There are not a lot of adults in the room. And we as a society don't, I don't think, have lost the art. We don't know how to have hard conversations. We don't know how to have difficult conversations, we don't know how to communicate effectively, I think. And no matter how old you are, doesn't matter how old you are biologically. This tension that we see happening in terms of the divisiveness across differences, that comes because people on both sides are carrying a lot of baggage and trauma and all this other stuff, and don't know how to communicate and talk to each other. Because we never learned that as a culture, as a society. We haven't taught that in a certain very intentional way. And, you know, there's that, but that's a whole other. That's kind of like a, I went on a bird walk, but that's a whole other deeper, other thing that relates, but it's like, you're like, I'm way in the weeds right now, but that's all I'm going to give you.

Mason Scioneaux

I think that's a good place for us to leave it.

Atish Baidya

Okay.