



Voices Behind Bars: National Public Radio and Angola State Prison Teaching Note

Case Summary

Journalists generally must interview numerous sources in order to tell balanced, compelling narratives. But getting the necessary interviews can be difficult, especially when subjects are hard to reach, reluctant to talk or could be punished for speaking to the press.

This case focuses on one journalist who faced such challenges in 2008, when she embarked on a story about two prisoners who had been held in solitary confinement for 36 years—longer than any other inmates in the United States. During the period that National Public Radio (NPR) reporter Laura Sullivan conducted her research, the men—jailed at a state penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana—were moved into a 12-person cell. Through their lawyer, Sullivan learned that they were willing for her to interview them. But prison officials refused to cooperate and threatened to return the inmates to solitary confinement if they communicated with her.

Sullivan knew from her years covering police and prisons that it was unwise to mislead authorities and did not want to jeopardize the prisoners' well-being. But she also believed their voices were central to her story, which was about an apparent serious miscarriage of justice.

Students learn about the history of NPR and Angola State Prison, and follow Sullivan's investigation from its origins as a tip at a prison conference into a full-fledged investigation. They trace Sullivan's research into the prisoners—including article searches and attempts to interview members of the close-knit prison community—amid stonewalling by Angola officials and her growing suspicion that Wallace and Woodfox were wrongly convicted for the murder that sent them to solitary confinement. Class members watch as Sullivan, with the help of her editor, tries to define the parameters of her story, circumvent uncooperative prison staff, and gain access to the men who remain frustratingly out of reach during her trips to Angola. Finally, they step into Sullivan's shoes as she grapples with the decision of whether to talk to the prisoners by phone—a move that would plug a significant hole in her story, but could also send her subjects back into the isolation they have endured for more than three decades.

Teaching Objectives

Use this case to discuss ethics in journalism, particularly those involving a reporter's obligation to sources and her relationship to authorities; the techniques and practices of investigative journalism; creative storytelling and news judgment; strategies and techniques for covering the criminal justice system in general, and prisons in particular; and the challenges of creating a story for radio, rather than for print or television.

Sullivan wrestles with the knowledge that her work could send Wallace and Woodfox back to solitary confinement. Discuss her dilemma as part of a broader conversation about the tension that can arise between a journalist's goals and those of the people he or she writes about. What responsibility do journalists have to their subjects? If people are willing to be interviewed, are reporters responsible for any punishment they may incur as a result?

Sullivan's relationship with prison authorities is key to her success as a "crime and punishment" reporter. But Angola officials make it clear that they do not want her talking with Wallace and Woodfox. To what extent does the story merit Sullivan defying the prison's wishes? Talk more broadly about how reporters should handle contacts and sources with whom they must have ongoing relationships; the circumstances, if any, under which those relationships should be compromised; and the pluses and minuses of beat reporting in general.

Sullivan's story expands from a piece about solitary confinement to one that focuses on a possible miscarriage of justice. Do you agree with the shift in emphasis? Consider the two themes and the rationale that Sullivan and Senior National Editor Steven Drummond provide for each. Do you agree with their thinking? How else might you conceive and frame the story? Discuss within the context of news judgment and story prioritization.

Class Plan

Use this case in a course about broadcast journalism (radio); journalism ethics; investigative journalism; covering prisons and the justice system; and human rights reporting.

Study questions. Help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following question in advance:

1) To what extent is Sullivan responsible for what the prison authorities may do to Wallace and Woodfox if they talk to her?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions. The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) Sullivan's initial research involves several steps, including reading case files about the prisoners, searching LexisNexis, and contacting the prisoner advocacy group "Free the Angola Three." Outline and analyze the stages of her research and suggest other courses of action that she could have pursued.
- b) Sullivan prefers to build her stories "working up from the least important sources to the most central ones." Do you agree that this is always the best approach? Did Sullivan contact Angola officials too early, as she fears? Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of approaching key sources early in the research process.
- c) Sullivan and Drummond agree that the story has two separate themes: solitary confinement and a possible miscarriage of justice. Which, if either, do you think is more significant? What other themes, if any, would you emphasize?
- d) According to Drummond, Sullivan's initial struggle was to "define a story and try to wrestle it into a manageable size." How well did she do? How else might she have framed the story?
- e) Can Sullivan do her segment without interviewing Wallace and Woodfox? Brainstorm ways that journalists can report around characters that are either uncooperative or out of reach, and consider the pros and cons of such strategies.
- f) According to Sullivan, "you are your reputation, and the only reason you get access to prisoners or you are allowed to come back is because they trust you're going to be true to your word." Evaluate the way in which Sullivan tests this dynamic. Could she have handled things differently, and if so how? Use her dilemma to discuss the pluses and minuses of beat reporting.
- g) As her reporting continues, Sullivan becomes fixated on whether the prisoners are guilty or innocent. But Drummond persuades her to leave this question open and focus on their solitary confinement and the legal process that convicted them. Do you agree with this shift in emphasis? Which angle do you think is most compelling?
- h) Sullivan eventually begins to make inroads into the inner circle of Angola's closed community, including Leontine Verrett, widow of the prison guard that Wallace and Woodfox were convicted of killing, and former prison inmates. Could Sullivan tell the story adequately via these characters, without speaking to Woodfox and Wallace? What is lost, or even gained, by doing so?

- i) Early on, Sullivan folds her request to interview Wallace and Woodfox into a simultaneous request to interview inmates for another story. What do you think of this tactic? How else could she have handled reluctant prison officials? Discuss the line between valid reportorial techniques and unethical subterfuge.
- j) Wallace and Woodfox's lawyer, Nick Trenticosta, is eager to arrange a phone call with his clients, who are "anxious to talk... and tell their side of things," despite the risk of being returned to solitary confinement. Given their willingness to participate, to what extent would Woodfox and Wallace be responsible for such a turn of events? What about their lawyer, or Sullivan herself?
- k) As a radio reporter, Sullivan must record interviews and ambient sound to compile her stories. How, if at all, would the story—and the way she reported it—have developed differently had she been working in another medium?

Suggested Readings

Jennifer Bjorhus, "Getting into Prison," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July 1994, Vol. 33, Issue 2, 14.

SYNOPSIS: Noting that "only a handful of reporters" cover the millions of people associated with the vast world of the American prison system, this article suggests several examples of reporting, primarily from the mid-1990s, that focus on prisons and those associated with them.

See also:

Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: The Rise of America's Prison Empire*. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: This book provides a history of American incarceration, tracing many of the problems with today's penal system to the Lone Star State and its policies towards prisoners. It also claims that criminal justice patterns established during slavery and segregation continue to be found in prisons today.

Jason DeParle, "The American Prison Nightmare," *The New York Review of Books*, April 12, 2007, Vol. 54, Issue 6.

SYNOPSIS: DeParle, a *New York Times* reporter, addresses the American prison system in his review of three books related to the subject.

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20056>

 "How Journalists Use Sources," *Nieman Reports*, Fall 1999, Vol. 53, Issue 3.

SYNOPSIS: This edition of the Harvard-based publication touches on several aspects of the journalist-source relationship raised in the case, including "The Role of Reporters' Judgment," "Stages of Reporting: Finding and Using Sources," "Working With Key Sources," and "The Roles Editors Play."

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports.aspx?id=100039>

Other Resources

The Farm: Life Inside Angola, 1998 (Documentary), dir. Liz Garbus, Wilbert Rideau, and Jonathan Stack.

SYNOPSIS: This award-winning, gritty documentary provides a look at daily life in Angola Prison. It focuses on six inmates, including two who are fighting to prove their innocence, one nervous newcomer, a long-time death row inmate facing execution, and a convicted wife-killer who is dying of cancer.

See also:

A Decade Behind Bars: Return to the Farm, 2009 (Documentary), dir. Liz Garbus and Jonathan Stack.

SYNOPSIS: This follow up to "The Farm" features the four surviving inmates featured in the original documentary and chronicles changes in the prison over the ten intervening years.

"Freedom of Information: Covering Prisons," Society of Professional Journalists.

SYNOPSIS: This web resource provided by the Society of Professional Journalists has state by state information about media policies relating to prisons, including state policies governing media access, rules governing reporting tools, visitation list rules, execution witness policies, required forms, and state correctional contacts.

<http://www.spj.org/prisonaccess.asp>

"Covering Crime and Justice," Criminal Justice Journalists.

SYNOPSIS: This guide to covering crime and justice, written by journalists for journalists, provides basics and resources for topics like covering juvenile justice, drugs, and crime and its victims.

<http://www.justicejournalism.org/crimeguide/toc.html>

"The Crime Report," The Center on Media, Crime and Justice.

SYNOPSIS: This non-partisan "news and multimedia information and networking resource" produced by The Center on Media, Crime and Justice, a think tank based at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY), and Criminal Justice Journalists, the nation's only membership organization of crime-beat journalists includes reporting, commentary, analysis, and research on a range of topics including prisons, courts, policing, and terrorism—and a database that provides information such as current crime trends and statistics and issues.

<http://thecrimereport.org/>