

Shaila Dewan: I know, I said I didn't want to be first, but I didn't say I wanted to go after Amy Goodman.

(Laughter.)

Shaila Dewan: So, I'm based in Atlanta and I cover the South, and I'm not a media scholar, I don't spend a lot of time analyzing the media and -- I mean, not that I don't think critically about what I do and we do -- but I think my perspective as a reporter is probably more valuable in this setting.

Because I cover the South, I have the privilege of talking to a lot of poor people, and a lot of black people and a lot of -- well, the occasional Amish person, and since I live in Atlanta, I also get to talk to a lot of middle class black people and write about them.

And I view it as one of my primary goals to get those voices into the newspaper, which seems like a really simple goal and maybe not even that important, but when I talk to my editors and I realize the sort of gulf in understanding between what I'm covering daily and where they are sitting, I view it as an important thing to accomplish.

So, I feel kind of compelled now to bring some of those voices into this room. I was writing a story about black farmers in Mississippi who had won a class-action suit against the USDA for systematic -- decades of systematic -- discrimination. [Many of the farmers had yet to receive a settlement, even though they had won the case.] One of them said, "It's not yesteryear, but in Mississippi it still is. You can sing, dance, do anything you want, but there's no way around the bald facts." That was an 82-year-old veteran named Eddie Cotton.

"They said black farmers, I know I was one," said Joe Malone, 75. "They sure shut the door on me. They said black farmers and I know that's all I ever did. Eat fatback meat, drink milk, cornbread, nothing better but on the farm."

I did a story about a FEMA trailer park in Baton Rouge where kids weren't going to school. And there were a lot of reasons for this, but I talked to one eighth grader named Michael Lewis who had gotten in trouble in Baton Rouge for fighting -- a lot of kids were getting into fights because they were from New Orleans and they were getting picked on, and he said, "You can't really hardly communicate with other people. I don't know why they have such a grudge on us, they just do."

Then he said, "I love school, there's no place I would rather be during school hours than in school. I want to stay in a child place, but life keeps putting me in a man's place."

I talked to a woman in Houston who was an activist for evacuees and an evacuee herself. She was explaining that she wanted evacuees to be regarded as refugees -- initially they didn't want that word used to describe them because, after all, they were Americans.

But she said that refugees who came to the United States were treated better than the evacuees have been treated. She said, "They got clothing, they got furniture, they give them jobs 24 hours after they get to these United States -- now you all pay taxes for this -- they give them a Social Security card, they give them Medicaid, and here we are and nobody's saying nothing for us."

I talked to Wanda Jackson, whose family was still waiting to see if the body of her 6-year old nephew could be found in New Orleans. She said, "We never reached out to anyone to tell our story because there's no ending to our story. Because we haven't found our deceased. Being honest with you, in my opinion, they forgot about us." She went on to say, "They did not build nothing on 9/11 until they were sure that the damn dust was not human dust. So how you go on and build things in our city?"

Another woman, who described herself as one level above poverty, who had ended up in Baltimore after the storm said that, "It just wasn't the same. For me New Orleans is the most Afro-centric city in the United States, there's a way we talk and a way that we be that's just home." And she's talking about Baltimore and she said, "Once we felt that chill in the air, and it wasn't even autumn yet, and just the people there -- it was generally cold."

So, these are the kind of things that I really like to get into the New York Times, that's my greatest pleasure when I'm working -- well that and the occasional well-turned phrase that the editors don't take out.

So, you know, it's really important to be able to get inside people's heads as much as you can and explain where they're coming from. Yesterday we had a meeting in Atlanta with some editors and some reporters from around the country and one of my colleagues brought up the notion of doing a story about communities that spring up around prisons, and the families of prisoners will move to be near the prison because they can't afford to travel and visit them and they would never see their loved ones otherwise.

And my editor was just astonished by this notion, flabbergasted. And she said, "Well, they must be expecting them to get out really soon," and my colleague said, "No, they're expecting them to be in there for a long, long time."

And this was actually pretty easy for me to understand, having talked to a lot of people, a lot of poor people, a lot of uneducated people, a lot of people with relatives in prison. Having read books that go deeper into the world that we're talking about like "Random Family" by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, which I highly recommend. I could understand it, but I wasn't sure that I could explain it to someone who, to whom this was just a crazy notion. And that's my job is to bridge this gulf, to try to talk about what the obstacles are when you're a poor person living in the United States.

And even to talk about things like why black people in New Orleans would elect Congressman Bill Jefferson again. This is something that, you know, it takes explanation to your editors in New York.

That goes back to what Mr. Rosen was saying about having diverse perspectives, and I actually think there's something kind of in between the two scenarios he outlined -- one is you're hired for your voice, and another is that you get there and you're sort of, your voice is bleached out of you. There's some middle ground there.

I was writing a story once during the Catholic priest scandal, and I wanted to write about women who had been abused by clergyman. And I said, you know, this has been going on forever. So I worked on the story and I was interviewing people and I was having conversations with my editor about it, and after several conversations, he finally said, "Wait, I just realized something," I said, "Yeah?" He goes, "Well, women wouldn't want to come forward because they would be afraid that they would be blamed." And I was like,

“Duh! I mean, this is a situation where my point of view isn't being ironed out, I'm actually able to explain something to him. And, you know, to me it's incredible that it took him that long to figure that out, but that's, you know -- “

(Laughter.)

Shaila Dewan: And, I mean, I love where I work, don't get me wrong.

(Laughter.)

Shaila Dewan: Where am I here -- there are many kind of pitfalls to covering stories like Katrina which has engaged a lot of my time, obviously, and a lot of questions that I have to constantly ask myself. I have to ask myself -- are people, are the people I'm writing about taking advantage of the government? Are they among the many, many people who defrauded FEMA? Are they doing all they can to recover from this, or are they lapsing into helplessness, or does it make sense that they're lapsing into helplessness because they're so traumatized?

These are all questions that I'm asking myself all of the time and, you know, we have to -- to some degree -- make these kind of judgments which are not by rights, ours to make, but this is the business that we're in.

So I have to, if I want to explain to my editors why something is a story, I have to explain the vulnerabilities, the limited horizons that people face, the many ways in which people's lives, the realities of people's lives are run counter to the American dream, and the idea of upward mobility that exists, and also doesn't exist in some ways.

Sorry, my computer is not behaving -- this is a pitfall of technology. Where did my talk go? Ah ha, it's gone! Oh, here we go, okay.

So another interesting thing that comes up a lot in my coverage is the subject of race. The Times also had policies about when we mention people's race and we consider it important to mention it when it's relevant. I've noticed that in the South, if I'm talking about a politician, their race is always relevant. If I'm talking about a poor person, it's not necessarily always relevant. From my point of view, covering the South, race is always relevant, but to get my editors to understand that is another issue altogether, and so for the media scholars out there, it would be interesting to look at language used in newspapers like the Times when they bring up race and when they don't.

And lastly I want to make this important point that we're talking about covering poverty and I work within a particular format -- the newspaper. And that format has flaws, it has limitations, but it essentially my job is to cover news. And poverty, by itself, is not news. For me to write about it in my position -- I'm not a columnist or an editorialist -- there has to be some, it has to be through a certain lens, or there has to be some change. The Brookings Institute just came out with a study showing that there are more poor people in the suburbs now than in the city. That, for example, I can see a lot of stories coming out of something like that. But in terms of how to increase coverage of poverty, I'm about to write a story about people who are dying for lack of medication, prescription medication. Now, is that a story about health? Or is that a story about poverty? To me it's not -- I can't -- it's not one or the other, it's both.