Twitter Thread by Angus Johnston



Angus Johnston
@studentactivism

I’ve asked Byers to clarify, but as I read this tweet, it seems that Bret Stephens included an unredacted use of the n-word in his column this week to make a point, and the column got spiked—maybe as a result?

> Stephens goes on in his column (which never saw light of day) to cite famous Lee Atwater quote that uses racial slur, and which NYT has cited \u201cat least seven times.\u201d
>
> "Is this now supposed to be a scandal?\u201d he asks.
>
> ...
>
> — Dylan Byers (@DylanByers) February 11, 2021

Four times. The column used the n-word (in the context of a quote) four times. https://t.co/14vPhQZktB https://t.co/hcDXh5zMZc

> That is correct. In his draft he quotes Atwater using the word (4 times) and he does not redact it.
>
> — Dylan Byers (@DylanByers) February 11, 2021

For context: In 2019, a Times reporter was reprimanded for several incidents of racial insensitivity on a trip with high school students, including one in which he used the n-word in a discussion of racial slurs.

That incident became public late last month, and late last week, after 150 Times employees complained about how it had been handled, the reporter in question resigned. https://t.co/3S8MFvrMcN

In the course of all that, the Times' executive editor said that the paper does not "tolerate racist language regardless of intent.” This was the quote that Bret Stephens was pushing back against in his column. (Which, again, was deep-sixed by the paper.)

Stephens and folks like him tend to lean heavily on something called the "use-mention distinction," which is the principle that using a word yourself isn't the same as quoting someone else using it.

I find that distinction a useful one myself, but here's the thing that folks like Bret need to remember: IT'S NOT A MAGIC WAND.

There was no need for Stephens to use the n-word in his column (four times!). It didn't clarify anything, eliminate any ambiguity about his referent or intent.

It was gratuitous. And the gratuitous use of racial slurs is vile. To put it another way, the gratuitous use of racial slurs is USE. Not "mention," use.

The Times published the Atwater quote unredacted as recently as a year and a half ago, in a Krugman column. The difference? The quote was actually relevant to that column, which was about GOP racism. https://t.co/GtmqsztlBJ

> ITT we censor the actual political strategy of the post-Southern Strategy Republican party in the name of wokeness.
>
> — General Secretary of Harm Reduction (@ImmortalJuche) February 11, 2021

Also, just to reiterate: The reporter at the center of the original scandal, Donald McNeil, WAS NOT FIRED. He was reprimanded privately, and quit when the story became public.

Would Don McNeil have been fired if he hadn't quit? We don't know. Why don't we know? BECAUSE HE QUIT.

I really hate it when people claim that folks who were criticized for doing or saying obnoxious things got fired in situations in which those people did not in fact get fired.

BTW, I should have used the word "uttered" rather than "used" in this tweet, given the discussion of the use/mention distinction later in the thread. The context of the utterance is a matter of some ambiguity. https://t.co/9pTh0S7JJu

> For context: In 2019, a Times reporter was reprimanded for several incidents of racial insensitivity on a trip with high school students, including one in which he used the n-word in a discussion of racial slurs.
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> — Angus Johnston (@studentactivism) February 11, 2021

This is really well said, and it reflects the evolution of my own views on the topic. https://t.co/fMhUZlzsT3

> One of the things my students have taught me in recent years is that my standard for what constitutes \u201cgratuitous\u201d may be far higher than theirs and in fact at this point it may be that all white \u201cmention\u201d of racial slurs is becoming, or already just is, \u201cuse.\u201d https://t.co/4zjJSgLjhf
>
> — Gerry Canavan (@gerrycanavan) February 11, 2021