

On Recent Criticism of The 1619 Project

A response from our editor.

By Jake Silverstein

Oct. 16, 2020

The 1619 Project, which was conceived of and led by Nikole Hannah-Jones, a staff writer at The New York Times Magazine, advances a bold claim: that the date when the first enslaved Africans arrived in the English colonies that would become the United States — August of 1619 — can be regarded as the nation’s birth or point of origin. Why does the project propose this? In part because, as its essays show, the system of slavery and oppression that began on this date has led to so many of the problems that define our past and our present; in part because, as Hannah-Jones argues, the struggle against this system of oppression has been a pivotal freedom movement unfolding across many generations to advance progress for American society as a whole; and in part to advance the case that, as the heroes of both of these stories, Black Americans, whose presence in the English colonies that would become the United States began on this date, should occupy a central role in American history.

In the 14 months since publication, the project has attracted millions of readers and had a remarkable impact on the way that many Americans think about the country’s past. It has elevated the year [1619](#) to a far more prominent status than it has ever had. And it has prompted countless conversations and reflection about the persistence of racism and inequality in a country founded on the principle that “all men are created equal.” It has also attracted a fair bit of criticism. Some of that criticism has come from supporters of the project and its goals, who want to challenge certain of its ideas or interpretations of historical moments. Other critics have tried to challenge the legitimacy of the entire project and of our decision to publish it. The vociferousness of these latter critics, who have come to include the president of the United States, is perhaps understandable, given the project’s attempt to unsettle the way that Americans think about their nation’s history. As the editor of the magazine, I have worked with our research staff to look at all claims of factual inaccuracy — a standard process that has resulted in some minor corrections, which you can find at the bottom of some of the individual articles online — but otherwise I have tried to let the project to speak for itself.

Recently, however, a new line of criticism has emerged, centering on a series of edits made to the presentation of the project online in the months after publication. Because these edits raise questions, at least in the minds of some, about the editorial practices behind the project, I’d like to offer a picture of the underlying facts.

One fact of life about editing a “multiplatform” publication today — one that our readers consume in the print magazine, on the web and on mobile devices, as well as sometimes through audio, video and live events — is the challenge of figuring out how to present the same journalism in all those different media. A significant portion of time goes into writing all the

“display language” that describes our stories across these various platforms: headlines for print and online, social copy, summaries of stories for newsletters, etc. The bigger the project, the more numerous the platforms tend to be, which means that even more of this work is required. To give a recent example, a magazine project on food insecurity in America by the photographer Brenda Ann Kenneally took up an entire issue of the print magazine *and* a special section in the Saturday edition of the print New York Times, produced by the National Desk; online it took an [entirely different form](#), produced by The Times’s Digital News Design team, with a text that had only small overlap with anything that appeared in print.

No project during my tenure has been bigger, and involved more platforms, than The 1619 Project. In print, the project existed as a magazine issue containing 10 historical essays and one photo portfolio, plus a broadsheet section continuing an essay and a brief history of slavery. Online, these elements came together in a richly designed [digital presentation](#), and they were joined over time by [a five-episode podcast](#), produced in conjunction with The Times’s audio team; new articles; a photo essay; videos of live events; and more. (The whole notion of calling this a project was to emphasize that the work would be ongoing.)

The idea animating all this work was summarized in a variety of ways: in print, there was the type that appeared on the cover of the magazine, the headlines for each story, as well as an editor’s note and various small bits of text on the table of contents. When we produced it online, a whole different set of digital display language was required. We also had to summarize it for online newsletters and social media; for the episode descriptions in the podcast series; in the programs for live events; etc. There are small discrepancies between some of these summaries, as there are in the various display language for every major project we produce. But as with all of our journalism, although the language may appear differently in different formats, we give great attention to its accuracy and its fidelity to the articles they describe.

- Gift Subscriptions to The Times, Cooking or Games.

[Starting at \\$25.](#)

Most of the questions around our display language have centered on variations on a single phrase. In some cases, we referred to 1619 as the nation’s “birth year,” in others as our “birth date,” in others as “a foundational date,” in others as our “point of origin.” In one instance of digital display copy, we referred to 1619 as our “true founding.” It is this use of this last phrase, and its subsequent deletion, that was the subject of an article in the online magazine Quillette and then, more recently, that figured prominently in a [column](#) by my colleague Bret Stephens, a columnist on The Times’s Opinion page.

A few notes on this phrase, “true founding”: It was written by a digital editor and approved by me. (Hannah-Jones, as a staff writer at the magazine is not typically involved in matters of digital display language.) It does not appear in the print edition of The 1619 Project. This phrase was introduced when the project went online, in August 2019, appearing in an un-bylined 55-word passage that lived in a small box on the project’s main web page, as well as on the individual story pages, which read as follows: “The 1619 Project is a major initiative from The

New York Times. It aims to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding, and placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative.”

Given the space constraints, “true founding” was a way to summarize the “birth” metaphor that appeared here and there throughout the print edition — such as in a sentence in my editor’s note that read: “The goal of The 1619 Project, a major initiative from The New York Times that this issue of the magazine inaugurates, is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.” It also carried some of the meaning of a sentence from Hannah-Jones’s [essay](#) in which she says that Black Americans, “as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true ‘founding fathers.’” (This summer, President Obama made a similar comparison in his [eulogy](#) for the civil rights leader and congressman John Lewis, calling him a “founding father of that fuller, fairer, better America.”)

Nevertheless, in the months after the package went online, we began to wonder if we’d gotten it quite right. In the longer phrase from the editor’s note (“by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year”), the sense that this was a metaphor — a whole new perspective on American history that this collection of essays would give you — was explicit. The online language risked being read literally. And indeed, some readers pointed out that this word choice implied that the specific historical meaning of what took place during the founding period should be replaced by the specific historical meaning of what took place in 1619.

Sign up for The New York Times Magazine Newsletter: The best of The New York Times Magazine delivered to your inbox every week, including exclusive feature stories, photography, columns and more.

So in December, we edited this digital display text to more closely mirror what appeared in the print magazine. We did not see this as a significant alteration, let alone concession, in how we presented the project. Within the project’s essays, the argument about 1619’s being the nation’s symbolic point of origin remained.

Another way we expressed this rather complicated idea was in a line on the cover of the print magazine: “America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began.” Stephens and others have highlighted the fact that this passage “disappeared from the digital display copy without explanation” as a cause for concern. The line in question appears in print in the middle of the following passage:

In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the British colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the 250 years of slavery that followed. On the 400th anniversary of this fateful moment, it is finally time to tell our story truthfully.

On a phone screen, that's a lot of text, so our digital editors condensed this by removing the line, "America was not yet America, but this was the moment it began." This is the sort of edit that happens between print and digital all the time. We found another use for this line, however, in the voice-over of a [TV ad](#) about The 1619 Project, featuring Janelle Monae, that The New York Times created earlier this year to air during the Oscars.

Stephens also directs attention to discrepancies between the text of my editor's note as it appeared in print and a version of this text that appeared online. First, it is important to note that when The 1619 Project appeared online, the editor's note that accompanied the print edition of the magazine was not included in the digital edition at all. This often happens with magazine special issues. Inevitably, a certain amount of print "furniture" (intros, blurbs, sidebars, etc.) is discarded in the transition to digital. And so in August, when The 1619 Project was published, this 600-word intro did not appear anywhere online.

Four months later, the project had grown bigger, and the main page of the digital version had become longer. This page had a beautiful digital layout, but we saw the need for another page with a more stripped-down table of contents that simply listed the basic elements of the project without much design. So we published one, with a brief introduction, and called this new article "[Why We Published The 1619 Project.](#)" For the introduction, we used an edited version of the print editor's note. We more or less kept it as is, but we made some improvements to the language, eliminated references to print, fixed the tenses, trimmed a few lines and added a brief paragraph about our partnership with the Smithsonian.

The discrepancy that caught Stephens's attention was between the first paragraph of the print editor's note published on Aug. 19, and the first paragraph of the version published in December. The former begins like this:

1619 is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation's birth. What if, however, we were to tell you that this fact, which is taught in our schools and unanimously celebrated every Fourth of July, is wrong, and that the country's true birth date, the moment that our defining contradictions first came into the world, was in late August of 1619? ...The goal of The 1619 Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country. [The passage after the ellipses is the beginning of the third paragraph]

In the digital article published four months later, the first paragraph is shorter and puts less emphasis on the contrast between 1776 and 1619.

1619 is not a year that most Americans know as a notable date in our country's history. Those who do are at most a tiny fraction of those who can tell you that 1776 is the year of our nation's birth. What if, however, we were to tell you that the moment that the country's defining contradictions first came into the world was in late August of 1619? ...The goal of The 1619

Project is to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation's birth year. Doing so requires us to place the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the story we tell ourselves about who we are as a country.

A fair reading would be that both texts express that the goal of the project is for the reader to consider 1619 as the nation's birth year. The first is more forceful, the second more restrained. The change is to the wording and the length, not the facts. In both versions, the conclusion is the same: that the goal of the project is to get readers to consider 1619 as the nation's birth year. Did this alteration (and the others that were made to this text) warrant a public acknowledgment? I didn't think so at the time, and when I put the question to the editors at The Times's Standards Desk recently, they agreed. Just as in the above examples, this was a matter of phrasing, length and emphasis, not a factual change. What you see across all of the editorial activity I've outlined above is the good-faith efforts of magazine editors to best convey, in a series of different print and digital text fields, a complicated point about the distinction between a literal founding and a symbolic birth year.

**

Where does this all leave us? Perhaps there will be some readers who follow all of this and think that, even though these changes were customary ones, we made a mistake by not acknowledging them. Fair enough. In its scale and impact, The 1619 Project is completely unlike any work of journalism the magazine has ever produced. Perhaps for that reason, it should have been subject to an even greater level of transparency around the standard editing process.

But putting aside that concern for a moment, it is clear that much of the criticism stems from a disagreement with the project's alternate view of American history. Some critics have proposed that the metaphor of 1776 as our birth year offers a clearer vision of that history, since it implies that the ideals of our founding documents — and the more than two centuries of work to live up to them — define the country more accurately than a story of four centuries of racism and inequality. But by starting the clock in 1619, Hannah-Jones is not only asking readers to consider the full weight of slavery and its aftermath; she is asking readers to think of the 244 years of effort to live up to our founding ideals as part of a larger freedom story, one that began 157 years earlier and features Black Americans as its heroic subjects.

Looking at American history as The 1619 Project does involves changing what's in the middle of the picture; it moves the frame. And in so doing, it unsettles the prevailing narratives about our past. This has created controversy, but it is also acutely needed. There has been a consistent struggle across many generations to teach Americans accurately about the history of slavery. Despite the important work of many historians in recent decades, a [disturbing 2017 study](#) from the Southern Poverty Law Center that examined popular U.S. history books and polled social-studies teachers and high school seniors concluded that “popular textbooks fail to provide comprehensive coverage of slavery and enslaved peoples.” The study found that 58 percent of teachers felt their textbook's coverage of slavery was inadequate; only 8 percent of high school

seniors were aware that slavery was the central cause of the Civil War; and fewer than one in four students could identify how certain provisions in the Constitution gave advantages to enslavers.

This is why I am pleased to report that, out in the world, the project that Hannah-Jones conceived, in consultation with historians and scholars, is continuing to deepen understanding about the American past. It has been used as [an educational tool](#) by more than 4,000 teachers in all 50 states — augmenting, not replacing, the traditional curriculum for teaching U.S. history. This summer, as a historic protest movement erupted in the aftermath of George Floyd’s killing, the 1619 podcast — which had been one of the top podcasts in the country in 2019 — saw a wave of new downloads push it back to the top of the lists. Just this week, the project was [chosen](#) as one of the 10 best works of journalism of the decade by a panel of journalists and historians at New York University. The project that Hannah-Jones created is one of the most transformative works of journalism that The New York Times has ever published. It was not perfect; few things of any ambition ever are. But 14 months after its publication, its “core premises” remain unshaken and indispensable.