On April 13th, I attended the Bernstein Symposium panel titled The Ethics/Politics of Finding Facts and Making Truth. An aspect I found very interesting was the fact that the panel itself seemed to be engaging in fact finding by presenting the room with ideas that the general public is aware of and may even hold to be true but are not actually realized in practice. Matiangai Sirleaf really solidified the point that truth does not always equal support and healing. There is the assumption that the public sharing of pain will create solidarity, but that doesn’t always happen, and in many cases there is only a small chance of it happening in the first place. Anyone can be stigmatized, especially women, for sharing their pain if it is pain the world is not ready to acknowledge. For this reason, witnessing should be done in private, behind closed doors to help protect the identities of people telling their stories. Interviewers have to engage in a degree of self-censorship to ensure their data collection does not ultimately harm those they are interviewing.

A central point also heavily covered in the panel was the issue of power imbalances. There is the ever-lingering question of how do you forge relationships between fact finders and local communities? There is often a tension between fact finders, those who are in a particular location or looking into a topic, and regular citizens, people who are actually experiencing an event. One side is focused on truth and the other on daily life and survival. It is important to spend time cultivating trust between fact finders and citizens because otherwise the fact finders hold an inherent power in the relationship. One of the panelists mentioned that it’s hard to criticize aid efforts when you need help, which creates a power imbalance between the interviewer and interviewee. The narrative of the “ungrateful needy person” still permeates society, which makes it difficult for people not in positions of power to receive help while also maintaining the ability to be critical of the institutions helping them. Those in need of help have the same right as anyone else to comment on their situations, including whatever assistance they are given.

In the digital age, technology can both be helpful and a detriment to fact finding. Molly Land touched on the introduction of user-generated data, satellites and drones, open source data, and algorithms/AI in her presentation about the innovations that have changed the field of fact finding. She really honed in on user-generated data as both a positive and a negative; with smartphones now being virtually everywhere, everyone has a camera in their pocket and can upload pictures and videos to social media. This also means, however, that there is an issue of verification. Since the quantity of data has expanded so much, it is inevitable that some of the content will not be real or valid. The potential for fake content is such a damaging problem, that some organizations have worked on creating apps to solve the issue. The apps encrypt videos, verify them by finding the time and location (geotagging) they were taken at, and then send them to a secure database. Strides are being taken to adapt fact finding to the conditions of the world, including the continuing spread of technology, and fact finding remains important. It can help level the playing field and bring clarity to events.