



Evidence Blocking*

Jonathan Rapping**

* The term “evidence blocking” and the ideas set forth in this paper come from my colleague and mentor at the D.C. Public Defender Service, Jonathan Stern. Mr. Stern honed the practice of evidence blocking to an art. There is not a concept in this paper that I did not steal from Mr. Stern, including examples presented. He deserves full credit for this paper.

** Jonathan Rapping is the Executive Director of the Southern Public Defender Training Center and is on the faculty of Atlanta’s John Marshall law School.

I. Facts of the World v. Facts of the Case

If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? We may confidently answer, "yes." However, we cannot, with certainty, know what exactly it sounded like. Scientists might estimate what the sound would have been based on whatever factors scientists use, but that will be an approximation. They may disagree on the density of other vegetation in the area that would affect the sound, or the moisture in the soil that may be a factor. Perhaps the guess will be close to the actual sound. Perhaps not. We can never know for sure. A trial is the same way. It is a recreation, in a courtroom, of a series of events that previously took place. There are disagreements over factors that impact the picture that is created for the jury. The picture painted for the jury is affected by biases of the witnesses, the quality and quantity of evidence that is admitted, and the jury's own viewpoint. In the end, the picture the jury sees may be close to what actually occurred or may be vastly different.

Understanding that the picture that is painted for the jury is the one that matters is central to the trial lawyer's ability to be an effective advocate. It is helpful to think of facts in two categories: facts of the world and facts of the case. The first category, facts of the world, are the facts that actually occurred surrounding the event in question in our case. We will never know with certainty what the facts of the world are. The second category, facts of the case, are the facts that are presented at trial. It is from these facts that the fact-finder will attempt to approximate as closely as possible the facts of the world. The fact-finder will never be able to perfectly recreate a picture of what happened during the incident in question. How close the fact-finder can get will be a function of the reliability and completeness of the facts that are presented at trial.

II. The Difference Between Prosecutors and Defense Attorneys

By understanding that the outcome of the trial is a function of the facts of the case, we have a huge advantage over the prosecution. The prosecutor tends to believe he knows the "truth." He thinks the facts of the world are perfectly reflected by his view of the evidence known to him. When the facts of the case point to a conclusion that is different from the one he believes he knows to be true, the prosecutor is unable to adjust. He can't move from the picture he has concluded in his mind to be "true." Therefore, he renders himself unable to see the same picture that is painted before the jury at trial. The good defense attorney understands she is incapable of knowing the "truth." She focuses on the facts of the case. She remains flexible to adjust to facts that are presented, or excluded, that she did not anticipate. In that sense she is better equipped to see

the picture the jury sees and to effectively argue that picture as one of innocence, or that at least raises a reasonable doubt.

The ability to think outside the box is one of the main advantages defense attorneys have over prosecutors. It is a talent honed out of necessity. We necessarily have to reject the version of events that are sponsored by the prosecution. They are a version that points to our client's guilt. We must remain open to any alternative theory, and proceed with that open mind throughout our trial preparation.

Prosecutors generally develop a theory very early on in the investigation of the case. Before the investigation is complete they have usually settled on a suspect, a motive, and other critical details of the offense. In the prosecutor's mind, this version of events is synonymous with what actually happened. In other words, the prosecutor assumes he knows the "truth." The fundamental problem with this way of thinking is that all investigation from that point on is with an eye towards proving that theory. Instead of being open minded about evidence learned, there is a bias in the investigation. Evidence that points to another theory must be wrong. When it comes to a witness who supports the government's theory but, to an objective observer, has a great motive to lie, the prosecutor assumes the witness is truthful and that the motive to lie is the product of creative defense lawyering. This way of thinking infects the prosecution at every level: from the prosecutor in charge of the case to law enforcement personnel who are involved with the prosecution. Whether the prosecution theory ultimately is right or wrong, this mid-set taints the ability to critically think about the case.

Good defense attorneys don't do this!!! We understand that the "truth" is something we will almost certainly never know and that, more importantly, will not be accurately represented by the evidence that makes it into the trial. We understand that a trial is an attempt to recreate a picture of historical events through witnesses who have biases, mis-recollections, and perceptions that can be inaccurate. We know trials are replete with evidence that is subject to a number of interpretations and that the prism through which the jury views this evidence depends on the degree to which, and manner in which, it is presented. In short, as defense attorneys, we understand that a trial is not about what "really happened." Rather, it is about the conclusions to which the fact-finder is led by the facts that are presented at trial. This may closely resemble what actually occurred or be far from it. We will never know. As defense attorneys we deal with the facts that will be available to our fact-finder. To do otherwise would be to do a disservice to our client.

For example, imagine a case that hinges on one issue, whether the traffic light was red or green. The prosecutor has interviewed ten nuns, all of whom

claim to have witnessed the incident in question. Each of the ten nuns insists that the light was green. The defense has one lone witness. This witness says the light was red. At trial, not a single nun shows up to court. The only witness to testify to the color of the light is the lone defense witness, who says it was red. The prosecutor sees this case as a green light case in which one witness was wrong. The jury, on the other hand, sees only a red light case. It knows nothing of the nuns. The only evidence is that the light was red. As defense attorneys we must also see the case as a red light case. These are the only facts of the case. Even assuming the ten nuns were correct, that the light was green, those facts are irrelevant to this case and the jury that will decide it.

III. The Art of Evidence Blocking

The defense attorney's job is to shape the facts of the case in a manner most favorable to her client. She must be able to identify as many ways as possible to keep facts that hurt her client from becoming facts of the case. Likewise, she must be thoughtful about how to argue the admissibility of facts that are helpful to her client's case. This requires a keen understanding of the facts that are potentially part of the case and a mastery of the law that will determine which of these facts become facts of the case.

As a starting proposition, the defense attorney should consider every conceivable way to exclude every piece of evidence in the case. Under the American system of justice, the prosecution has the burden of building a case against the defendant. The prosecution must build that case beyond a reasonable doubt. The facts available to the prosecution are the bricks with which the prosecutor will attempt to build that case. At the extreme, if we can successfully exclude all of the facts, there will be no evidence for the jury. It follows that the more facts we can successfully keep out of the case, the less bricks available to the prosecution from which to build the case against our client.

A wise advocacy principle is to never underestimate your opponent. Along this line it would behoove you to assume that if the prosecutor wants a piece of evidence in a case, it is because it is helpful to his plan to win a conviction against your client. Assume he is competent. Assume he knows what he is doing. Assume that fact is good for his case, and therefore bad for your client. Therefore, you do not want that fact in the case. Resist the temptation to take a fact the prosecution will use, and make it a part of your defense before you have considered whether you can have that fact excluded from the trial and how the case will look without it. Far too often defense attorneys learn facts in a case and begin thinking of how those facts will fit into a defense theory without considering whether the fact can be excluded from the trial. This puts the cart

before the horse. We must train ourselves to view every fact critically. We must consider whether that fact is necessarily going to be a part of the case before we decide to embrace it¹.

The prosecutor obviously knows his case, and how he plans to build it, much better than you do. If you accept the premise prosecutors tend to do things for a reason, i.e. to help convict your client, then it follows that any fact the prosecution wishes to use to build its case against your client is one we should try to keep out of evidence. Even if you are unwilling to give the prosecutor that much credit, limiting the facts at his disposal to use against your client can only be beneficial. This defines a method of practice coined by Jonathan Stern as “evidence blocking.” Put plainly, evidence blocking is the practice of working to keep assertions about facts of the world out of the case. This exercise is one that forces us to consider the many ways facts can be kept out of evidence, and therefore made to be irrelevant to the facts of the case, and the derivative benefits of litigating these issues.

It is helpful to think of evidence blocking in four stages: 1) suppression/discovery violations; 2) witness problems; 3) evidence problems; and presentation problems.

A. Suppression / Discovery and Other Statutory Violations

The first stage we must think about when seeking to block evidence includes violations by the prosecution team of the Constitution, statutory authority, or court rule. We must think creatively about how evidence gathered by the State may be the fruit of a Constitutional violation. Generally, in this regard, we consider violations of the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments. We look to any physical evidence seized by the government, statements allegedly made by your client, and identifications that arguably resulted from a government-sponsored identification procedure. We consider theories under which this evidence was obtained illegally and we move to suppress that evidence. We also must look to any violations of a statute or rule that might arguably warrant exclusion of evidence as a sanction. A prime example of this is a motion to exclude evidence based on a violation of the law of discovery. How we litigate these issues will define how much of the evidence at issue is admitted

¹ Of course, after going through this exercise, there will be facts that you have concluded are going to be part of the “facts of the case.” These are “facts beyond control.” At that point it is wise to consider how your case theory might embrace these facts beyond control, thereby neutralizing their damaging impact. However, this paper is meant to serve as a caution to the defense attorney to not engage in the exercise of developing a case theory around seemingly bad facts until she has thoroughly considered whether she can exclude those facts from the case.

at trial and how it can be used. We must use our litigation strategy to define how these issues are discussed.

B. Witness Problems

A second stage of evidence blocking involves identifying problems with government witnesses. This includes considering the witness' basis of knowledge. A witness may not testify regarding facts about which she does not have personal knowledge. It also includes thinking about any privileges the witness may have. Be thoughtful about whether a witness has a Fifth Amendment privilege. Consider marital privilege, attorney/client privilege, and any other privilege that could present an obstacle to the government's ability to introduce testimony it desires in its case. Another example of a witness problem is incompetency. We should always be on the lookout for information that arguable renders a witness incompetent to testify and move to have that witness excluded from testifying at trial. These are some examples of witness problems.

C. Evidence Problems

While witness problems relate to problems with the witness herself, we must also consider a third stage of evidence blocking: problems with the evidence itself. Even with a witness who has no problems such as those described above, there may be problems with the evidence the government wishes for them wish to present. Perhaps the information the witness has is barred because it is hearsay. Consider whether the evidence is arguably irrelevant. Think about whether the evidence is substantially more prejudicial than probative. These are all examples of problems with the evidence.

D. Presentation Problems

A final stage of evidence blocking involves a problem with the method of presentation of the evidence. Maybe the government is unable to complete the necessary chain of custody. The prosecutor may be missing a witness who is critical to completing the chain of custody. Maybe the prosecutor has never been challenged with respect to chain of custody and is unaware of who he needs to get the evidence admitted. By being on your feet you may successfully exclude the evidence the prosecutor needs to make its case against your client. Another example of a presentation problem is where the prosecutor is unable to lay a proper foundation for admission of some evidence. A third example is a prosecutor who is unable to ask a proper question (for example, leading on

direct). These are all examples of problems the prosecutor could have in getting evidence before the jury if you are paying attention and making the appropriate objections.

IV. How Do You Raise An Issue

Once you have decided that there is evidence that should not be admitted at your trial you must consider the best method for bringing the issue to the Court's attention. You essentially have three options: 1) file a pretrial written Motion in Limine, 2) raise the issue orally as a preliminary matter, or 3) lodge a contemporaneous objection. There are pros and cons to each of these methods.

Some motions must be filed in writing prior to trial, such as motions to suppress. Each jurisdiction is different on the requirement regarding what must be filed pre-trial and the timing of the filing². For any motions that must be filed pretrial, you should always file pretrial motions whenever possible, for reasons stated below. However, many evidentiary issues may be raised without filing a motion. Objections to evidence on grounds that it is hearsay, irrelevant, substantially more prejudicial than probative, or any number of evidentiary grounds, are routinely made contemporaneously during trial. Certainly, should you anticipate an evidentiary issue in advance of trial you may raise it with the court. This may be done orally as a preliminary matter or in writing as a motion in limine.

What are the pros and cons of the different methods of raising an objection? Let's first consider a written, pretrial motion in limine. There are several advantages to filing a pretrial motion in limine to exclude evidence on evidentiary grounds. One is that it gives you a chance to educate the judge on the issue. Judges, like all of us, often do not know all of the law governing a particular issue off the top of their heads. If forced to rule on an issue without giving it careful thought, most judges rely on instinct. It is the rare judge whose instinct it is to help the criminal defendant. If the judge is going to rely on one of the parties to guide her, it is more often than not the prosecutor³. Therefore, you are often better off having had the chance to educate the judge than to rely on her ruling in your favor on a contemporaneous objection when the answer is not obvious.

² In Georgia, pursuant to O.C.G.A. 17-7-110, all pretrial motions, demurrers, and special pleas must be filed within ten days of the date of arraignment unless the trial court grants additional time pursuant to a motion.

³ To the extent that you have previous experience with that judge and you have developed a reputation for being thorough, smart, and honest, you may be the person upon whom the judge relies. If that is the case with the judge before whom you will be in trial, that may factor into your decision about whether to object contemporaneously.

A second reason for filing a written motion pretrial is that you are entitled to a response from the prosecutor. This benefits you in several ways. First, every time you force the prosecution to commit something to writing, you learn a little more about their case. Filing motions are a great way to get additional discovery by receiving a response. Second, whenever the prosecutor commits something to writing, he is locking himself into some version of the facts. If he characterizes a witness's testimony in a particular way and that witness ends up testifying differently, you have an issue to litigate. Presumably, the prosecutor accurately stated in his response to your motion what the witness told him or his agent. You now are entitled to call the prosecutor, or his agent, to impeach the witness. Maybe the response is an admission of the party opponent that can be introduced at trial. The bottom line is that there is now an issue where there would not have been one had you not forced the response to your motion⁴.

A third reason for filing a written motion is that there is always the chance that the prosecutor will fail to respond, despite being required to by law or ordered to by the court. Whenever the prosecutor fails to respond to a written motion you are in a position to ask for sanctions. Sanctions may be for the court to treat your motion as conceded. They might be exclusion of some evidence. Perhaps you may get an instruction in some circumstances. Be creative in the sanctions you request.

A fourth reason is that when you file a motion, you get a hearing. Pretrial hearings are great things. They give us a further preview of the prosecution's case, commit the prosecution to the evidence presented at the hearing, and may result in sanctions.

A fifth reason for filing motions whenever you can is that it increases the size of your client's court file. A thick court file can be beneficial to your client in several ways. The sheer size of a large court file is intimidating to judges and prosecutors. Judges like to move their dockets. Thick case files tend to be trials that take a long time to complete. Judges will be less likely to force you to trial in a case with a thick case jacket. Similarly, prosecutors often have to make choices about which cases to offer better pleas in or to dismiss outright. The more of a hassle it is to deal with a case, the greater the chance the prosecutor will offer a good plea to your client or dismiss the case outright.

A sixth reason is that by taking the time to research and write the motion, you are better preparing yourself to deal with the issue and to consider how it impacts your trial strategy.

⁴ One of Jonathan Stern's cardinal rules that I have taken to heart is that you always want to be litigating something other than guilt or innocence.

A final reason for filing pretrial motions even when not required is that you appear to be honest and concerned with everyone getting the result right. By appearing to be on the up and up you can gain points with the court that will spill over to other aspects of the trial.

What are the downsides to filing a motion in advance of trial. One is certainly that you give the prosecution a heads up to an issue you seek to raise. To the extent that you identify a problem with the government's case, they may be able to fix it with advance notice. Certainly this is an important consideration that must be factored into your decision about whether to raise an evidentiary issue in writing, pretrial. A second issue, which concerns me much less, is that it allows the prosecutor to do the research he needs to do to address the legal issue you raise. Certainly by filing a pretrial motion you allow everyone to be more prepared. However, if the issue is an important one, and the judge's ruling depends on the prosecutor having a chance to do some research, most judges will give the prosecutor time to research the question before ruling whenever you raise it. To the extent this holds up the trial, there is always the risk the judge will fault you for not raising the issue earlier.

The third option, raising the issue orally as a preliminary matter, is a compromise between the other two alternatives. Obviously, it has some of the pros and cons of the other alternatives. How you handle any given issue must be the product of careful thought and analysis.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, as defense attorneys we must take advantage of any tools at our disposal to alter the landscape of the trial in our client's favor. In order to do this we must understand and appreciate the difference between facts in the world and facts in the case. By undergoing a rigorous analysis of the facts that are potentially part of the case against our client, we may be able to keep some of those facts out of evidence. This exercise has the benefit of keeping from the prosecutor some of the blocks he hoped to use to build the case against you client. It alters the facts of the case in a way the prosecutor may be unable to deal with. And by litigating these issues we stand to derive residual benefits that will shape the outcome of the trial.