Totem and Taboo: The Culture of the News Media

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The news media are usually thought of as agents for change, and sometimes this is true. The intense coverage of the civil rights movement, with images of southern sheriffs setting dogs on nonviolent protesters, shocked and shamed the nation and helped get new antidiscrimination laws enacted. But just as often the staccato of bad news bolsters the status quo and a conservative agenda. Why? Because people tend to believe that the world was once more orderly and just, especially when today seems chaotic and disordered. It's easy to think that if we could only return to some vanished Eden, all would be well again. If only we could make the world like it used to be, by restoring family values or throwing more people in jail, we'd all be better off. But the past was rarely as good as we thought it was nor the present so bad.

Bad news can in fact persuade people that the world is much more dangerous than it is. George Gerbner of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania finds that people who watch a lot of television see the world as much more threatening and filled with menace than those who watch less do.[1] James Alan Fox, dean of the College of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University in Boston, says that fears about crime have less to do with actual crime rates than with the perception of crime we get from the news. "The technology of reporting has changed dramatically in the past fifteen years," he says. "With live minicams and satellites, it is possible for any local news outlet to lead every night's newscast with a crime story, including good video."[2] He calls the 11 P.M. report "Crimetime News." Bad news can create panic and distort the public agenda. A case in point: in the spring of 1994 polls showed that the number one issue on the minds of Americans was crime, whereas only a few months earlier it had been health care. Was this change in concern warranted?

Not according to the statistics. Crime had in fact been decreasing in recent years; Americans were less likely than a few years earlier to be the victims of violence. Why were they suddenly terrified? Because the media coverage of crime had intensified. Several shocking high-profile crimes had made the national news—the . . . subway shooter and the killings of tourists in Florida—and coverage of gang violence in the inner city was incessant. The rise in popularity of tabloid journalism—in print or on the many sensational TV shows—also helped to fuel the concern about crime. But the irony is that the profitability of the drug trade—and the involvement of so many inner city gangs in its bloody pursuit—made it *less* likely that the average American was going to be mugged on a city thoroughfare. The gangs had turned inner cities into scenes of carnage, and for the inhabitants of those areas it was a tragedy, but few Americans in other areas were menaced by drive-by shootings. In fact, we are far more likely to be killed by someone we know than by a homeboy with an AK-47. But bad news can reshape the world in unfamiliar and frightening contours.

The bad news syndrome is linked to another characteristic of the news media tribe—its exclusive focus on the present and its tendency to ignore the past. The news media are by definition ahistorical. They have a tendency to reinvent the wheel. Some member of the tribe will come up with a shiny new spherical object, and peers will gather'round, oohing and ahhing at its marvelous shape, its surprising ability to roll along the ground, while in the cave just behind them are dozens and dozens of wheels in all sizes and shapes, fashioned by other members of the tribe in the months and years that have just passed. I am often astonished not only by simple errors of fact that show up in news stories but by the total lack of context. Journalists make flat statements about welfare, about history, about science, about women, about almost everything, that reflect a total ignorance beyond what some expert or some politician has just said.

This tendency has been heightened in recent years because 5
older people—who could supply such context just by having lived for a while—are fast disappearing from newsrooms. The anchorman you see on the evening news may have touches of gray in his hair, but the assignment editor is probably a twenty-three-year-old who doesn't even know who the mayor *was* ten years ago, much less what his policies were. And it is the assignment editor who's deciding what's on the news. Newspapers are offering buyouts to older and more expensive employees in favor of inexpensive, young, energetic talent. If you look around many newsrooms

today, you will find hardly a soul who was there twenty years ago. The young journalists often mistake the handy conventional wisdom, or the latest intellectual fad or pronouncement from a media-anointed guru, as actual fact. I did it when I was a cub reporter. Wisdom, perspective—these come only with time. Without them you get uncritical acceptance of such ahistoric ideas as the notion that welfare *created* illegitimacy, to mention a currently popular shibboleth repeated often in the media as if it were so. But one-third of births in pre–Revolutionary War Concord were illegitimate, and our founding mothers were not on food stamps.

Combine the bad news of today with the news media's inability to grasp much beyond the recent past, and it's clear why people believe in a golden past that really didn't exist. You want crime? Try the nineteenth century, when the police were terrified to even set foot in some neighborhoods, and roving bands of violent young men terrorized the populace at will. Worried about how kids are behaving? You may think the fifties were happy days, but in fact the media at the time were filled with stories of unmanageable "juvenile delinquents."

Every era has its problems, but thinking that only *we* are in dire straits, that no people have ever grappled with our problems before, can lead to foolish actions. Fifty years from now, because the news media filled us with terror about crime, will we be straining to pay the bills for housing criminals we sent to jail for life at twenty and are now the most expensive segment of our elderly population? The media drumbeat about drugs a few years back helped create mandatory sentences that filled the jails with dealers. It turned out that we had to let murderers and rapists out to keep the small-fry drug dealers in.

In any event, take what you read and hear in the media with a grain of salt. We tend to believe what is spread before us, because the media have such an air of authority. Television news comes with the cadence of urgent-sounding music, sets of bright colors, and words like *Action News* flashing across the screen; the stentorian tones of the anchors can make a late-day snow storm sound like Armageddon. Newspapers have thick black type and pious editorials and labels that announce *Commentary* in commanding tones on their op-ed pages. All this is the wrapping, and it's easy to provide if you have a good deep voice or a throbbing theme song or a computer that makes nice graphics. But try to ignore all this and remember: it may not really be the gray-haired anchorman who chose the news he brings us today but somebody who is still using acne medicine.

The news media clan, like tribes who live in forests or by rude streams, has its own "anointed ones," Those-Who-Speak-with-Gods. Now we all know that the guys (I use the word advisedly) who speak with gods have a good deal of power in the tribe. But the anointed ones—be they sources or columnists or Big Foot reporters—tend to be much alike. They are nearly always upper-middle-class white males whose worldview is remarkably similar. Even if they didn't start out as upper class, years of being part of a privileged elite have usually dimmed the sense of what it is like for the rest of us, who live less elevated lives. Whom do you see on *Crossfire*, on *Meet the Press*, on the *McLaughlin Group*, on the evening news, on the op-ed pages of newspapers? The same guys, over and over. A few women, only a handful of blacks and a couple of Hispanics are in this group.

The result is that the national debate tends, day after day, to focus on the interests and experiences of these people. It was not surprising that in the 1992 presidential election the problems of cities and the issues of poverty were barely mentioned, and instead a middle-class tax cut was debated roundly. The Clinton camp didn't want to talk about poor people or blacks, because blacks weren't going to vote Republican, and Clinton knew the election lay with the middle class. George Bush wasn't about to dwell on poverty. The boys (and girls) on the bus didn't push the issues. They grew up for the most part in suburbia and had no memory of being poor or working class. When I criticized the lack of media coverage of such issues, a Washington reporter said to me, "The president who deals with the issues of the cities will be the next president—of Common Cause." That may be good campaign strategy, but reporters should be holding the candidates' feet to the fire on precisely the issues they want to avoid. They didn't, because the press was bored with poverty, which had no personal effect on them. Nobody got off the press plane and drove home to Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Working-class voices—not to mention those of poor people—are rarely heard on op-ed pages. The exotic minutiae of foreign policy, the endless inside-the-beltway battles, are the stuff that interests elite journalists. Rarely do such people face layoffs or downsizing, whereas millions of Americans are facing an economic crisis as companies get meaner and leaner, young people can't get jobs, and older workers are being laid off. Couples trying desperately to juggle home and work are struggling to find affordable day care. Yet these issues hardly dominate coverage and comment. Whitewater, however, with its hints of insider intrigue and power players, becomes a megastory.

Because the media tend to be fascinated with games men play—politics, war, sports—and the reader is generally assumed to be male, you get an overabundance of news of interest to white men and surprisingly little that is of interest to others. Also, white guys tend to assume white males are individual voices, whereas blacks, women, Hispanics, and others always speak for the entire group. Thus you may see fifteen columns on Bosnia or Whitewater on op-ed pages—sometimes two on the same subject on the same day—but one piece by an African American journalist on a "black issue" is assumed to have covered the subject fully. The same goes for women. How often do you see two pieces on day care by two women on the same op-ed page? Editors will say, about a "women's issue" piece, "Oh, Ellen Goodman did that already." But day after day, page after page, white men pontificate on Bosnia or the arms race or crime, and no one says the subjects have already been done.

Like all groups, the news media clan has its traditions and rituals that it assumes are shared by one and all. They have been written down by Those-Who-Speak-with-Gods. But they tend to exclude many of the not-so-elite, which is why many of us do not strongly identify with what we see or read. For instance, newspapers are losing female readers. Perhaps it is because women do not see themselves when they open their morning newspaper. Studies show that since 1985 women have been disappearing from the front pages of newspapers[3]—and their appearances there were never terribly frequent. A female point of view is even rarer.

In our society maleness is the norm and whiteness is the "norm." The set of viewpoints, ideas, and attitudes that often comes with being male or being white is seen as neutral and unbiased. At the same time, people with a different set of attitudes are nearly always seen as being biased or as being "advocates." This sense is pervasive in the news media, despite the inroads that women and members of minority groups are making. I was fascinated by a conversation I had with a male reporter from a major East Coast newspaper. He complained that his paper had been taken over by women and blacks and that white men were afraid to speak out. He also complained that he didn't like to speak at colleges because students got angry at him when he said that blacks and women didn't really have it so bad anymore and that it was white men who were being discriminated against. He was clearly a man who had strong emotions on the subject.

I asked him about the ways in which women had too much influence over the news at his paper, and he cited the story about a study claiming that teachers in school were biased against girls.

He remarked that he thought it absurd to think that in this day and age girls still faced such discrimination, and he said he thought the story was overplayed.

As it happened, this was a story I was quite familiar with, having reviewed much of the research for a book I had written and having fairly recently looked at the newer studies. I found the research to be compelling, because the findings were replicated time and again—found in more than one study, a good indication that bias against girls is a real phenomenon. I had seen videos in which female teachers, unaware of their behavior, ignored the waving hands of little girls in the front row time and again to call on boys in the back. I knew about all this prior research. I judged from the reporter's remarks that he did not.

The swirl of personal experience was the thing that drew me to . . . journalism; in fact I think it's what draws most journalists, male or female. We are at heart storytellers, not scientists. Journalism is more art than science, and the notion that we are androids, collecting, weighing, and measuring "facts" that are as fixed and intractable as moon rocks, is a chilling one.

Transcending personal experience is an impossible goal at any rate. Among those who argued in the 1920s for a new scientific journalism was Walter Lippmann. He called for journalists to remain clear and free of their irrational and unexamined biases. Lippmann, a German Jew who was so assimilated that he hardly remembered he was Jewish, wrote hardly at all about the Holocaust, one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century. Could he not face the vulnerability of a group to which he belonged, however marginally? You have to suspect that the omission had nothing at all to do with "scientific journalism" and everything to do with the swirl of personal experience.

The consequences of the reporter as android are many; Theodore Glasser sums them up this way:

> Objectivity is biased in favor of the status quo; it is inherently conservative to the extent that it encourages reporters to rely on what sociologist Alvin Gouldner describes as "the managers of the status quo"—the prominent and the elite. Second, objective reporting is biased against independent thinking. It emasculates the intellect by treating it as a disinterested spectator. Finally, objective reporting is biased against the very idea of responsibility—the day's news is viewed as something journalists are compelled to report, not something they are responsible for creating.[4]

The idea of objectivity can combine with the white male norm to keep the parameters of what is considered legitimate

opinion quite narrow. Objectivity often does not mean a hard examination of all "facts" but only of those that the gatekeeper suspects. Once I was doing an article for a newspaper in which I used as my major sources a black academician and a female professor. But an editor asked me to add another source, a white male professor who had no history of research in the area. Clearly, the editor simply did not have confidence in the "facts" offered by the woman and the black, believing—probably subconsciously—that they were somehow suspect. When my source was a white male, I have never been asked to go and find a woman or a black to bolster the credibility of the information, but the reverse has often been true.

The canon of objectivity is one reason that the voices of blacks and women are not quite trusted. They are suspected of either special pleading or of fuzzy emotionalism. Several women journalists I know have heard editors make remarks indicating that women, although able to turn a nice phrase, are just not as objective in their way of thinking as men.

Objectivity fosters another illusion: that the journalist has no connection to—or, as Glasser says, responsibility for—the subjects of his or her inquiry. Pressure to achieve that detachment is one reason journalists drink too much. We are often put in difficult situations regarding other human beings. We criticize them. We sometimes reveal that they are doing things that are wrong. We invade their private worlds in times of pain. Our job—to find and report the truth as best we can—may indeed result in harm to others. We ought not to pretend that all we feel is the buzz and clang of electronic gears when this happens. We ought to agonize over that. It will keep us honest—and human. We can try to be unbiased; we can try to be fair. But we will never really be *objective*. And we should not dodge moral responsibility in the name of this impossible goal.

And last is another sacred assumption I would like to address in this look at the rituals of the news media—the myth of the liberal press. It was always overdone. When I came into the business during the Kennedy era, the press bus did stop at many places it no longer goes. Many reporters came from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds and identified at a gut level with the underdog. Although publishers and newspaper owners tended to be staunchly conservative, the rank-and-file did not identify with wealth or privilege. During the Kennedy era liberal ideas often drove public policy initiatives. Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, read by Kennedy, was the wellspring of what became Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

That has changed dramatically during my years as a journalist. Today, as I've noted, journalists tend to lead upper-middle-class lives, often far removed from ordinary people. Indeed, Washington journalists today give speeches, star on TV panel shows, and are far more glamorous than many people they cover. As *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz points out, the pundits of both right and left warmly embraced the North American Free Trade Agreement, almost off-handedly dismissing fears of working-class Americans who felt their jobs were threatened. Kurtz says, "What was striking to me was how casually many journalists dismissed these concerns, comfortably secure in a business that is not among those threatened by foreign competition."[5]

I have seen the political winds shift significantly from left to 25
right, and journalists have swung with them. The media always go where the power goes. Today policy is driven by an energetic and powerful right funded by well-financed think tanks. When I covered the Goldwater convention as a young reporter, it seemed to many reporters that what we witnessed there was a strange and radical force that was alien to us. Today those ideas are in the mainstream, and it is the liberal ideas that often seem alien. In fact, much of the domestic agenda of John F. Kennedy would today be considered quite radical. The darlings of the media today are black conservatives, not the civil rights activists who were at center stage when I was a young reporter.

The political climate in America can only be called stunningly different from my early days in journalism. As sociologist Herbert Gans says, one of the great victories of the Reagan years was the creation of "a cadre of ideologically driven right-wing social scientists and intellectuals. Even now, the cadre's highly vocal presence helps keep liberals out of the media. For example, the so-called liberal position on media op edit pages and television panels is usually occupied by a moderate Democrat."[6]

Consider the case of Charles Murray, the co-author of *The Bell Curve,* now a media superstar, a frequent guest on talk shows, quoted by newsmagazines, asked to speak for considerable fees. Murray argues for the compete abolition of welfare, and his success, as historian Michael Katz points out, "illustrates the role of big money in the marketplace of ideas."[7] William Hammet, president of the Manhattan Institute, read a pamphlet by Murray he liked and supported him for two years while Murray wrote his welfare book, *Losing Ground.* Hammet then invested in the production and promotion of the book, spending some $15,000 to send more than seven hundred free copies to power brokers and

journalists, and paid a public relations specialist to manage Murray, booking him on TV shows and the lecture circuit. The institute held a seminar on the book to which it invited journalists and intellectuals to participate, offering honoraria of $500 to $1,500. It was not Murray's brilliance that earned him entrée to the marketplace of ideas but the power of money and influence.[8]

A more affluent press corps identifies more easily with the attitudes and instincts of such a cadre, traditionally associated in America with the wealthy upper classes. Journalists no longer afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. We *are* the comfortable.

There is a lot I don't miss from the days when I was a cub reporter—the provincialism, the tendency to play ball with elected officials, the high levels of alcoholism, the male chauvinism, the near-total absence of minority reporters, the lousy pay, to mention a few. But I do believe journalism was a more compassionate business when I entered it, if only because more journalists came from the working classes. I worry that journalists have become too comfortable, too far removed from the daily struggles and the little terrors of getting by that so many people experience. I'm not sure we should be supping so casually at the tables of wealth and ease. It's too easy to forget what it was like out there, beyond the warmth of the fire where we always used to stand with the hired help, rubbing our hands and cursing, saying that if *we* were inside, surely we would do things differently.

Today's conventional wisdom in the media is created by a comfortable suburban press corps on whose ears the arguments of the right may fall with a pleasing ring. But what my thirty years as a journalist have taught me is that everything changes. When I stood inside the Cow Palace in San Francisco listening to the Goldwater minions roar, I could not have imagined that the political landscape would change so radically. It was chic to believe in those days that conservatism had died along with Bob Taft and the America Firsters and would never be seen again in our lifetime. It's chic in media circles today to embrace the neoconservative creed, and journalists often write that liberal ideas are dated and shopworn. But today's shopworn goods can become tomorrow's haute couture. You never know.

. . . [T]he culture of the news media will play a background theme—like Muzak in an elevator—to the discussion of wider cultural myths that create journalistic distortions. Careful, thoughtful journalists can often avoid the pull of mythology and the conventional wisdom. . . . The problem is that the nuanced, careful

piece too often simply gets drowned out by the clamor of the chic trend stories of the moment, and misinformation and half-truth blare from headlines and TV sound bites and nest in "background" paragraphs of otherwise competent stories. Most often the biases I discuss are subconscious and unintentional. I believe most journalists are conscientious and want to do a good job. That their thinking has been shaped by forces and ideas they do not realize they possess is no more an indictment of journalists than it is of all Americans—except that what journalists write and say is so important. "The first rough draft of history," as journalism has been called, needs to be corrected.

Endnotes

1. George Gerbner, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, *Living with Television* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1986), pp. 17–40.
2. James Alan Fox, "A Nation with Peril on Its Mind," *Los Angeles Times*, February 14, 1994.
3. Readership figures come from Media Watch, the watchdog group based at University of California at Los Angeles, 1990.
4. Theodore L. Glasser, "Objectivity Precludes Responsibility," *Quill*, February 1984.
5. Howard Kurtz, "When the Press Out classes the Public," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 1994.
6. Herbert Gans, *People, Plans, and Policies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. xvix.
7. Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor* (New York: Pantheon, 1989), p. 5.
8. Ibid., p. 152.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does Caryl Rivers mean by the following: "The news media are usually thought of as agents for change, and sometimes this is true"?
2. Why does Rivers criticize the media, white male journalists in particular, for being biased in terms of race and gender? What points does she use to support her claims? Are her points valid?
3. How does the author weigh in on objective versus subjective journalism? Which one does she favor? Why?
4. "The nuanced, careful piece too often simply gets drowned out by the clamor of the chic trend stories of the moment, and misinformation and half-truth blare from headlines and TV sound bites." What does Rivers mean by this observation? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Questions for Writing

1. According to Rivers, "The news media have the power to frame the news, and the frame makes all the difference." Is her claim accurate and fair? As you respond to this question in a persuasive essay, think about a number of news stories you have seen, heard, or read lately on television, radio, the Internet, or newspaper. Do they support or refute Rivers's claim?
2. Is the role of a journalist more like that of an artist or a scientist? Consider Rivers's view as a springboard for a persuasive essay defending your view.