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The Ways in Which it Shapes Perception**

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The Media's Influence: The Ways in Which it Shapes Perception

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Abstract

What is the truth? Since the spread of information, stories have been sensationalized for the purpose of popularity, or to galvanize people to a cause. However, the truth is often lost when this occurs. The media, in any language is rarely the whole truth. This paper will examine the different ways in which media has exaggerated stories to different ends. William Randolph Hearst, Orson Welles, and the effect racism has in the media's portrayal of minorities will all be examined.

概要

真実とは何か。情報が氾濫するようになって以来、物語（story）は大衆に迎合するためにセンセーショナルに表現されたり、人々にショックを与える原因になったりするようになった。しかしながら、それらが生じるとき真実は概ね失われている。どのメディアにおいても、すべての真実を伝えることは滅多にない。本稿は、両極端な結論をもたらす誇張された物語（story）の、方向性の違いについて検討する。対象となるのは、ウィリアム・ランドルフ・ハースト、オーソン・ウェルズ、そしてマイノリティの描写による人種主義の影響である。

キーワード Keywords

media, news, talk news radio

Throughout the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first, many changes have occurred; though one constant is the occasional callousness with which the media, in all of its forms, operates. In *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel say that “Journalism [is] defined by...the function news plays in the lives of people.” This is an important statement as the news and portrayals of events has affected history from high government officials, down to ordinary individuals, sometimes with terrible and damaging effects. Kovach and Rosenstiel further state, “the purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (Kovach). However, being free and self-governing implies that a person has all the facts and can make good judgments from there. This is often not the case as people and the media itself often infuse the news with opinion, creating a vehicle to spread fear and thus increase biases and prejudice.

To demonstrate, this essay will use three examples of the media swaying the public opinion. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, "yellow journalism" resorted to sensationalism and one newspaper mogul, William Randolph Hearst, used his newspaper empire to help fuel the Spanish-American war. Orson Welles' radio rendition of the book, *War of the Worlds*, was meant for theatrical purposes, but it ignited panic in several American towns and was examined as a poor use of the public's trust. Third, the media's treatment of minorities in the face of police violence, focusing on a lack of empathy and the reciprocal effects racism and media has, will also be examined.

In 1898, the threat of war with Spain loomed over the American public and government. Tensions were high with the situation in Cuba. After the explosion and destruction of the battleship *USS Maine* in the Havana harbor in 1898 (United States Army Corp), William Hearst of the *New York Journal* capitalized on the incident. He and his rival, Joseph Pulitzer, both published stories that wildly misrepresented the situation in Cuba. Headlines in Hearst's newspaper, the *Journal*, included bold, black letters that declared, "War? Sure!" (Wagner). Hearst went the distance as he had a hand in several stunts leading up to and during the war, which were subsequently used for publicity, political clout, and profit ("Yellow Journalism").

The *Journal's* assistance in the jailbreak and escape of Cuban revolutionary Evangeline Cisneros is one of these instances. For crimes against the Spanish rule of the time (crimes which included rejecting the advances of a Spanish colonel and physically restricting him to a chair after he approached her again) Cisneros was imprisoned in the Casa de Recogidas, Havana's run-down and filthy prison for women (Campbell). The *Journal* latched onto the story and portrayed Cisneros as a "beautiful, brave little woman who endured so much at the hands of Cuba's oppressors" and the "Cuban girl martyr". The portrayal of the Spanish as an evil entity that frequently abused women was a popular narrative at the time (Campbell).

Women are *things* that only have worth when pure and good. When damaged, they are no longer pure and thus are *things* to be protected. It is a ploy that has been used for hundreds of years; even by Elizabeth the first of England during her speech at Tilbury. She described herself as if she were actually England, small and nearly helpless against the Spanish armada that had come to "invade the borders of [her] realm" ("Elizabeth's Tilbury Speech"). It was no stretch of the imagination for Hearst to paint Cisneros in this way, especially when she faced a life sentence of hard labor in Spanish occupied African territories. When the American public learned of this, it inflamed them and the campaign against the Spanish grew (Campbell).

Another event that Hearst used for his benefit was when the *USS Maine* exploded in the Havana harbor. The *Journal* immediately printed articles placing the blame on the Spanish, when in actuality, no one knew the real culprit of the incident. Another theory was that either Cuban or Spanish mines caused the explosion. Hearst chose to believe the latter, publishing articles about the atrocities that the Spanish committed against the Cubans and American soldiers stationed there. The *Journal* went as far as offering fifty-thousand American dollars, a substantial amount of money in any time period, for the conviction of the culprits (Musicant). Soon enough there were chants of "remember the *Maine!* To Hell with Spain!" across Cuba and America (*The New York Times*).

Why did Hearst and the *Journal* go so far in this endeavor? It is suspected that Hearst had something to gain politically from Cuban independence but the main impetus for his action was for business and profit. The

more sensationalized the stories from Cuba became, the more the American public would flock to the cause and the more papers Hearst would sell. As Hearst himself once said, “journalism is only a business, like everything else!” (Stead). This is a statement that clearly shows Hearst’s intentions. His type of journalism, he said, was one “which seeks rather to educate and influence its audience, and through it to accomplish something for the benefit of the community and the whole country” (Stead). It’s debatable whether or not the war that came about from the turmoil in Cuba actually benefited the masses that purchased Hearst’s newspapers, but it is known that people were influenced thanks to his media.

As Hearst knew, fear and anger are effective tools that can be used to shape people’s actions. Another person who knew this was the famed Orson Welles. Instead of using these emotions to gain control over people and influence public opinion and government policy, Welles used those emotions to instill wonder and awe in his theatrical productions of plays, radio, and films. One event induced panic in several Americas towns.

On the evening of October 30, 1938, Orson Welles, along with his cast at the Mercury Theatre, told a radio rendition of H.G. Wells’ novel, *War of the Worlds*. Welles’ intention was to make the radio play sound like a frantic newsbreak about a Martian invasion of Earth. Though the claim of the entire country being thrown into turmoil has since been debunked (Chilton), a few small communities across the east coast of America did react in fear, some leaving their homes to get a glimpse of the supposed alien air battle with the United States air force. One town’s inhabitants, of Grover’s Mill, New Jersey, even participated in a gun battle of their own. As part of Welles’ story involved the town, the people fired guns with blanks at the town water tower, believing it had been over taken by aliens. Despite the fact that Welles broke character several times to state that the program was complete fiction, the listening public ignored him and continued to build upon their fears. In the aftermath, one woman sued CBS station, which broadcasted the hoax, for the anxiety attacks she suffered (Chilton).

While this level of manipulation is harmless compared to that of Hearst’s push for a war, the *War of the Worlds* broadcast still played on people’s fears. With the country on the brink of entering a world war in 1938, it is no wonder that the nation fell prey to the premise of Welles’ fictional tale. People were very frightened that the country would be attacked. Thus, the thought of a realistic radio broadcast of a shocking Martian invasion sparking fear into the hearts of the American public is not a far-fetched idea.

With only a few cast members, Welles was able to demonstrate how susceptible the public is to the media and how powerful a person with enough charisma and powers of persuasion can be. The *New York Tribune* columnist Dorothy Thompson succinctly described her opinion of the event:

All unwittingly, Mr. Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater of the Air have made one of the most fascinating and important demonstrations of all time...They have proved that a few effective voices, accompanied by sound effects, can convince masses of people of a totally unreasonable, completely fantastic proposition as to create a nation-wide panic. They have demonstrated more potently than any argument, demonstrated beyond a question of a doubt, the appalling dangers and enormous effectiveness of popular and theatrical demagoguery.... Hitler managed to scare all of Europe to its knees a month ago, but at least he had an army and an air force to back up his shrieking words. But

Mr. Welles scared thousands into demoralization with nothing at all (Thompson).

Years after, Welles did admit that he had been aiming for an emotional reaction; he never anticipated it would cause so much trouble. The purpose of presenting the piece as a genuine radio broadcast was, “to heighten the dramatic effect. The broadcast revealed the way politicians could use the power of mass communication to create theatrical illusions, to manipulate the public” (Heyer). Indeed several newspapers, including the *New York Times*, called into question the use of radio in such a way and the willingness of the public to believe what was told of them. In today’s world of the Internet, the spread of information is faster than ever before and users are not fastidious about fact checking. For example, the “infinite chocolate” hoax surfaced on Reddit in early 2013. An optical illusion .gif file involving a missing square puzzle quickly spread through social media. For a brief moment in Internet history, people believed that one bar of chocolate could be infinite (Broderick).

The examples of Hearst and Welles are both ones that show the power that the media can wield. However, the next example shows how a racial bias against groups of people can spread misinformation and reinforce ignorant beliefs of society today.

August 9th, 2014: a young man was gunned down by Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson. The young man’s name was Michael “Mike” Brown. He was black while Wilson is white. What followed was a prime example of the media choosing a preference and criminalizing those who do not fit the desired narrative.

Racism is such a problem that it has infiltrated every aspect of society and influenced thought for hundreds of years. In The United States of America, this is most evident in the way the media portrays minorities, specifically black men. When the news of Mike Brown’s death broke, the media had already started a campaign of, not misinformation, but misrepresentation.

The image used of Brown was of him in an oversized red basketball jersey, his hand outstretched in a gesture that some called a “gang sign”, when it was actually the two-fingered peace sign (Lewis). This image is problematic and suspect. Out of all the pictures of Brown, the chosen image is showing him to be what many mainstreams white Americans would identify as a gang member in his jersey, throwing up his “gang sign”. Soon, several other photos of Brown surfaced on the Internet. All of the pictures showed a teenager with a bright smile, sitting with his younger family members, or his high school graduation photo. Why did the media choose the “gang member” photo? It did not fit with the narrative.

Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed Brown, described the encounter as frightening, saying that Brown was a “demon” and a “monster” and that he felt afraid for his life, saying, “I felt like a 5-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan” (Bouie). Despite the fact that Wilson and Brown were nearly matched in height and weight (Brown a few inches taller and several pounds heavier), Wilson described Brown as a monster with whom he could not fight. This is the dangerous stereotype that perceives black men as menacing, hulking monsters with fists that can crush a person’s skull. It does not allow a black man, or boy, to be a person, instead reducing them to a mindless *thing* that doesn’t feel pain. It’s a terrifying image. Several studies have shown that many Americans, even medical professionals, actually believe that black people, even black children, do not feel as much pain as their lighter-skinned peers:

...what [researchers] ended up seeing was that [white people] felt that black people could just sort of take more pain. And we can see how this - it just creates this cycle of pain, then. Right? We have this assumption that because black people have been hardened by certain life experiences, that they can deal with more pain or they feel it less intensely, and therefore, they're forced to endure even more. So this was a very surprising result that we have here that shows us how this sort of works in a cycle (NPR).

The findings of this study are revealing as to possibly why, though not excusing that, Wilson thought his life was in danger from the fists of a black male teenager. It adds to the stereotype and influences the people who work in media to portray black victims of police violence in this way. The stereotype goes past black men and in even focuses on black children, mainly boys.

A study published by the American Psychological Association found that black boys around the age of ten are viewed as less innocent and more likely to cause trouble than their white counterparts. The research found that "black boys can be seen as responsible for their actions at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent" (Goff). This is something seen again in an earlier shooting of a black teenager, Trayvon Martin, by the civilian George Zimmerman. Zimmerman described Martin as "up to no good" (Lewis). Martin had been walking home at night when Zimmerman followed him for several blocks, eventually shooting him when Martin tried to run. When preexisting racial prejudices causes society to view children in a negative and accusatory light, the media follows suit, as these people in this society run the media.

In all of these instances, the bombastic journalism of Hearst, the gripping yet terrifying radio story of Welles, and the racial prejudices that affect minority representation in society today, the media capitalized on hot topics of each era and influenced public perspective and opinion. Although many say that the heyday of yellow journalism is long gone, there is much evidence, as stated above, to prove that it is still alive and well, employing sensationalism through the decades, only using a different name.

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