

Nick Butler  
POS 365  
Final Exam Paper  
12/20/2012

### **Most pressing problem in the media today?**

I believe the biggest problem facing the media today is the sensationalization of news in order to attract high amounts of viewership. Many media companies are sacrificing quality reporting and presenting news in an entertaining or alarming fashion. They cover politics in a celebrity-like manner and constantly use scare tactics to draw in audiences. This is degrading the press as we know it, and it threatens the ability of the public to learn about substantial and quality news.

As we discussed in class, *The New York Post* recently used a shocking image of a man in the path of an oncoming subway. The man was killed after the image was taken, but that didn't stop *The New York Post* from using the image with the headline, "Pushed on the subway track, this man is about to die—DOOMED." While deaths on the subway are not rare in New York City, they are not normally publicized as much as this. You don't even have to start reading the article to be drawn into the story, you start asking questions immediately: *Why didn't anyone help him? How did he get there? Why didn't the photographer help? Why was the photographer taking pictures?* You're hooked. Now you have to buy the paper and read the article. As *The New York Post* is exploiting this tragedy to sell newspapers, the United States remains in rough economic times. But, that story isn't good enough to sell newspapers to impulse buyers. That story is old, and it lingers with readers and hits too close to home. No one wants to read that story. This, however, sells newspapers like hotcakes.

It isn't just tabloids that are sensationalizing the news, either. Television networks are doing as well. We can see that most recently with the horrific tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, where 26 people, including 20 children, were killed by a lone gunman. The media picked this story up as soon as it happened, breaking into regularly scheduled programming to cover it. Of course a tragedy like this is going to be covered in the news, as it should be, but the immediate live coverage of the story was often times inaccurate and unfit for television. The networks reported the name of the gunman and showed an image of him, but it turned out the image and name they used was actually the brother of the killer. They reported that the killer's mother was a schoolteacher at Sandy Hook, and that she was murdered in the school. In fact, the mother had never taught at that school, and was killed earlier at her home. These mistakes, however, pale in comparison to the exploitation of the children who survived the shooting. As they were leaving the building, the press interviewed children as young as 6 years old, asking them questions like, "What was it like to hear gunshots?" It's unfortunate that the 24/7 news media sensationalizes these stories, consistently asking why the gunman did what he did, because it only encourages the next unstable person to commit a similar act.

The media doesn't only sensationalize tragedies, they also sensationalize elections. We saw this clearly in the 2012 presidential election. Although President Barack Obama maintained a consistent lead over Governor Mitt Romney, the press played it up like this was one of the closest elections in American history. In reality, the President was never behind in the swing states he would've had to lose in order to lose the presidency. Statisticians like Nate Silver were correct with their assertions from the beginning, but the press and pundits would have none of it. For them, it was all about maintaining an audience. No one likes to watch a blowout, so they

made the race seem close. If 10 polls were released in one day, with President Obama leading in 7 of them, 2 of them tied, and 1 with Governor Romney ahead, the press would often show the three where the President was tied or behind. This creates a perception of a tight race, one that would be more interesting to watch than the obvious outcome.

The big picture is that the sensationalization of news pollutes the overall content presented to the public. For every good news article, there are 10 more attempting to grab the audience and pull them in. While tailoring a network or newspaper to content which individuals want to watch or read is important, so is ensuring the spread of quality and relevant information. We cannot sacrifice good journalism to make a profit on news. We're seeing the media create models that limit journalism and resorts to celebrity-like coverage of the news.

While this may be a good business model, it is not good for the American people. To combat this problem, we need to ensure the continuation of publically funded news programs, such as PBS and NPR. These networks do not need to attract large audiences to sell advertising to companies, but are instead partially funded by the government and individual donors. However, the only way to solve the larger problem is for a culture shift to occur in America. People have to *want* to read informative news instead of pop culture gobbledygook. Until that shift occurs, I'm not sure a substantial change can be made.

### **Most significant thing I learned during this semester?**

The most significant thing that I learned about government and mass media in this class is the ever-changing narrative given to events to change the perception of the public. The 2012 presidential election was the perfect backdrop for this class, and it showed how the media and campaigns could change the perceptions of the public by driving the narrative they want told. I

already mentioned how the media made this election appear closer than it was, but it wasn't limited to just that.

Candidates use negative campaigning to demonize their opponents to gain support from voters using half-truths, or often all-out lies. While there are "fact checkers" who independently examine these ads, once they air the damage has already been done, and the public at large is not eager to research if an accusation is true. Because of this, negative ads are extremely effective. Negative ads played a major role in President Obama's reelection, as he was able to take Mitt Romney's greatest strength—his experience as a business leader—and turn it into a weakness, villainizing his years of leadership at Bain Capital. Romney's only chance of winning was by getting the public to hold the President accountable for the economy, but the President was able to diminish Romney's likability and convince voters to reelect him to another term.

It surprised me just how much of political campaigning was negative. Living in New York, we're not usually privy to the constant negative ads playing in swing states, but watching some of the advertisements on YouTube, it was surprising to see just how negative both campaigns were. This is by no means a new development in American politics, as negative campaigning has been occurring since the inception of campaigning itself. However, with unlimited money now being donated by large corporations to political SuperPACs, there are more negative ads being created than ever before.

This course has really opened my eyes to the practices the media uses to sensationalize the news, which I argued is the greatest issue facing the media today. Coming into this course, I didn't really think that deeply about the content the press was putting forward, and accepted it as the norm. But examining the content now, I can see that it's driven by a desire to attract a large

audience, to make more profits from advertisements. It's unfortunate that the quality of the press is slowly falling apart. All-in-all, this class was extremely interesting. The discussions that we had in class were both relevant and informative, and it was a setting that I'm not used to seeing in college.