

The media: misinterpretation of reality

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The media has a significant influence over the public since it was first established as an institution. Particularly the news media, media has had its influence in setting a nation's agenda, focusing the attention of people to specified issues as well as shaping the public's opinion are among the well documented influences rendered by the news media¹. Aside from feeding the public information about public affairs, the media do best in its ability to dictate people which issues are supposed to be important. The media does this by placing emphasis on specific issues.

In a more concrete setting, newspapers teach readers which issues are to be significantly regarded by placing stories in designated places. Top stories or cover stories are placed to be the most significant issues while other stories placed after it are simply rendered as less important or significant than the front page stories. Newspapers provide a multitude of cues about the salience of the topics in the daily news rendered in the daily news. For the television scene, the emphases on which stories are supposed to be important are manifested in the length of time devoted to the news story.

With the amount of power an institution as the media has, there is to question whether this power is taken advantage of. In the competitive world of news media, gaining readership is a tedious task. With issues on investment returns and the case for readership, there are arising doubts as to whether the news media really feeds people with the essential information or they manipulate the stories to able for readership and even capital gains. In this paper, we shall put focus on evidences that suggest that the news does not reflect reality but obscures it.

A look at media sensationalizing

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One of the evident manifestations of media's tendency to obscure reality and true stories lies in its nature of sensationalizing². This could be drawn from the 2004 elections. According to Mackin, the media experienced quite frenzy in attempting to stay updated for the election³. Assessing the performance of the media, it did not quite fairly cover the elections well. The media has a tendency to focus on the scandal and personalities involved that it forgets to look and delve into the real issues. This is one of the manifestations that news could obscure true stories. The media has a tendency to just highlight parts of the story without being able to render other sides of the story which may give clearance and understanding to the issue.

Essentially there are always more issues needed to be reported on, however, the media has its own biases when it comes to the coverage of a news event or issue. The media fundamentally has two types of biases³. The first type of bias is when the media does not focus on the more important issues. The second is that the bias which is geared towards objectivity.

Media is biased when it comes to veering away from the real issue in way that it does not clarify issues as intensively as they should be. If accusations are directed, the media does not render to investigate more in the issue. The focus of the media is to present to the public the accusations made and the personalities involved.

²Joyce Milton, *The Yellow Kids: Foreign correspondents in the heyday of yellow journalism*, Harper & Row, New York, 1989.

³ Mackin, Meaghan, *Media sensationalizing 2004 election*, 2008.

There are occasions where the root cause is not as heavily mentioned as they should. Media tends to sensationalize focusing more on the conflicts

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created rather than the causes. During the 2004 elections, the media were more focused in bringing the latest on polls, character and appearance of the candidates. They did not bring too much focus on the covering the issues which are supposed to be addressed during elections. The nature of the media to sensationalize issues adheres to the argument that news has a tendency to obscure reality than presenting it as it is. The media in this case is driven to present issues highlighting on scandals and personalities.

Although the institution is driven by the demand reflected upon the people, the essence of what a mass media should in the first place is lost. The media more than presenting the latest public affairs to the people should also be responsible in looking more and analyzing factors underlying the issues. As people demand for the latest headlines come the need to be rightfully informed as well. An individual not rightfully informed would be able to participate rightfully in with the issues at hand.

Since the media is the venue where people gather information, the expectation ranges too high with the credibility and truthfulness of the news or information. However, certain cases prove that news portrayed by media were inappropriate to the specific setting it must be relayed. Being a powerful venue to generate feedback and to build opinion through information dissemination and education to the larger scope of the population, news portrayed by media, in some cases unfortunately bears unfruitful information. Furthermore, news to some extent does not guarantee its veracity and reliability at all time. For instance, such circumstance in untruthful reporting is present to the portrayal of Western mass media to Africa.

Being the cradle of human kind, it appeared to achieve its negative height due to news about savagery the people were engaged into. These consequently gave the continent a face which every people worldwide mocked off and defamed. Depicted as “ Dark Continent”, Western people are encouraged to think that nothing good will ever emerged in its soil. Many in the West bought this negative impression due to the misdealing of reportage to the continent and to the African people.

According to Iyinbo4, the Western reportage is always directed to the portrayal of Africa as having a single entity discouraging the heterogeneity of tribes and cultures enriching the continent. For instance, the depiction of AIDS epidemic (Southern and Eastern Africa); wars, drought and starvation (Central and Eastern Africa); oil disasters (Niger-Delta, Nigeria); Muslim extremist (the North and Horn of Africa); bombings in Kenya and Tanzania (East Africa); " The Great Migration" (Kenya) all boil down to a continental issue disregarding the specificity of them to different parts of Africa.

Although mass media impacts greatly in resolving crises happening in the continent, more issues were put into wrong perspective which apparently discouraged more problem-solving strategies. Under the current dispensation, the consequences of their [mass media] misrepresentation of Africa and Africans are dire: belittling the people, undermining their accomplishments, destroying their self-esteem and heritage. It does also, albeit inadvertently, provide " arms" to bigots (on all sides). It does not augur well to incense the situation with mis- and disinformation all in the name of profits or ratings5.

4 Iyinbo, O., Misrepresentation of Africans and the role of Western media. The Informed Constituent, 2007.

5 Iyinbo, O., 2007.

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Moreover, the present connotation to mass media especially in news reporting becomes increasingly negative since many media stations offer only entertainment and gives biased and untruthful news⁶ (Loud, 2006). This trend defeat the purpose of new reporting as it veers away to the responsible information gathering, interpreting and disseminating. The conflict arises when the most popular news stations claim that they are unbiased and are often times not. As a defence, they tend to reason-out that unbiased reporting is near impossible.

Another problem with the news reporting practiced nowadays falls grimly to the misinterpretation of facts by news reporter and personnel. There are some intentional misinterpretations committed by news reporters for the purpose mainly of reporting safe and evading conflict regarding a specified issue. This can be best explained on the case of reporting about the pressing and present condition about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Considering the belaboured scientific research of researchers and scientist to credence AIDS more detailed including its various symptoms and realities, media conveyance tend to discourage such intents. As it is presented and described in a subtle manner, the portrayal of its real grim is avoided to be known by the mass populace.

In 2007, a Kaiser survey returned results that showed a mere 15 percent of those polled were personally concerned with becoming HIV positive (a 9 percent drop since 1997). Where once men and women considered AIDS a reputable and serious risk, they now consider the threat to be outside of their realm. This major shift in the perception of the AIDS threat, as many academicians worried, will only exacerbate the problem.

Loud, C., What's Wrong with the Media?, 2006.

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It can be argued that this change in perception is directly related to scientific advances in the field. AIDS previously was considered to be a death warrant for anyone who managed to contract HIV in one way or another.

However, it is also arguable to say that this change of perceptions is the consequence of the recent depictions of HIV/AIDS in mass media. Media tend to reinforce the idea that the disease can be beaten and would not kill those who contract it. This misinterpreted depiction given the risk and seriousness of incurable HIV/AIDS was manifested in the hit play *Angels in America*.

Although it was turned into an HBO mini-series which was highly-acclaimed, the subject matter greatly failed to educate and inform many on HIV or AIDS. Its timeliness magnificently hit American popular culture in telling accurately the history of AIDS it did not instill any sense of education to the viewer since it only dealt with the idea that human will battle anything—even the physical.

Another example of romanticized strategy to attack AIDS is when portrayal of the disease came with a major Broadway blockbuster entitled *RENT*. It only

portrayed Bohemian New Yorker in 1980's that having the expense of AZT (a popular drug which fights HIV's attack on the body) can make the victim manageable to sing without a sense of real urgency or impending doom. Although it portrayed during the time that AIDS is incurable, the viewers were left with the same message of hope that the disease played no urgent risk to the populace. The reality of the disease is downplayed despite it almost being a character unto itself in the film.

The more recent examples can be seen in a few commercials and ad campaigns made such resurgence of interest in the AIDS charity. In contextual American popular culture, throwing a celebrity fighting against AIDS through charity in the news is presumed to be the very best solution to counter AIDS.

Even grander campaign bearing the slogan "If one of us has AIDS, all of us have it." or popularly known as the "We all have AIDS campaign." gave only an appealing look to the impending death disease. The memorable yet ineffective way of the campaign is viewing the action in a bold statement composed largely of celebrities, politicians and religious leaders.

Essential to consider is the fact that AIDS's portrayal to mass media only resulted to the exploitation of celebrity and commodification of the disease. The misleading market tool manages to earn through the portrayal without the benefit of necessarily spreading awareness or education. Instead of placing a knowledgeable person who is living with the disease in front of the camera, marketers commodify the disease to earn fame and eventually to establish a profitable market. This consequently appeals only to the public to

give donation to a random charity disregarding the idea of better information about their own risks or how to protect themselves.

Even more blatant commodification is the creation of special garments and gadgets by organized charities/companies just to take the opportunity of selling them while some profit will go to an AIDS charity. Based in the United States, this massive campaign makes the money exclusively reserved for African AIDS causes which shifted the public perception by implying subconsciously that HIV/AIDS is no longer an issue in the US.

Since people cited that television is their most immediate and important source for information concerning AIDS (Research Unit for Health and Behavioural Change), a deeper analysis of media messages is important in understanding the sociological impact of AIDS and advertising as a means of educating. However, AIDS portrayals in advertisements are always misconstrued which leaves the people pretty sitting. It is also pointed out that the bulk of HIV/AIDS advertisements are vague, confusing, prejudiced and manage to perpetuate many misconceptions about AIDS that have the potential to spread the disease even further. It is due to this lack of true representation that the true cultural meaning of AIDS is pushed out of sight, causing vital health education messages to get lost or become misconstrued in the process.

According to Jenny Kitzinger's work titled "Audience understandings of AIDS media messages: a discussion of methods", that the meanings of media messages do not merely lie in just the content of the messages but more likely in the readings different audiences bring to the metaphorical

discussion. It is therefore argued that such messages are read based on social context and personal experience.

To compensate this shift of public perception regarding the cultural importance of HIV/AIDS, we must change the way it is represented in the media by pointing out that AIDS is much more serious than twitchy comedians and household celebrity names.

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Loud, C., *What's Wrong with the Media?*, 2006, Retrieved 20 April, 2008, .