

Truth as Media Road Kill

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I generally do not recommend taking life lessons from television situation comedies, particularly not ones recently broadcast, but occasionally there are notable nuggets of wisdom strategically hidden within the storylines. For nearly thirty (30) years, an episode of a sit-com has stood out in my mind as a succinct yet poignant exemplar of the proper roles of journalism and journalists.

In an episode of the 1980's sit-com, *The Facts of Life*, entitled, "Front Page," the character "Jo" (played by Nancy McKeon) runs a story in the student newspaper about her Journalism teacher, who she believes to be overbearing and hypocritical. The headline reads, "Teacher Busted in Cocaine Raid."

Since 1896, the motto appearing on the masthead of the *New York Times* has read, "All the News That's Fit to Print." As I read, listen, and view various news media today, I am confronted by what has become sensationalism in the media. Unfortunately, what passes as "fitting news" from many media outlets is often presented for its salacious impact, and the stories are often intended to arouse the most prurient interests of the audience. We have come to expect gossip, exaggeration, innuendo, and lies from tabloid journalism. Most of us know that objectivity is usually non-existent in internet blogs and the like. Often, it is difficult to discern the difference between what is intended to be "hard news" and "entertainment."

The shortcomings of tabloid journalism are not always limited to fringe media. Even "respectable" news media face unrelenting pressures to get out the story. There is a rush to be first, or at least timely, in what has become a continuous 24/7 news cycle. Sometimes lost in the rush to make the story is the search for and commitment to reason and truth.

It is said that "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword," and such power can lead to hubris and corruption. Integrity in media is a requisite to having confidence in the perspective of the observer and thus the story being told. When that perspective is lost, media fails in fulfilling its primary role of informing (and yes, educating) its audience.

The line drawn by today's media in determining what is newsworthy sometimes seems to relate less to actual truth than to a cost-benefit decision as to potential damages should the story or publication been adjudicated libelous. In such instances, "truth" would not be considered as a defense. Instead, the media argues that it too was duped or that there was no "actual malice" (publication knowing it to be false or with reckless disregard to its truth – a relatively low standard traditionally reserved for truly newsworthy "public figures").

Widespread distribution and perceived significance (or notoriety) is the cumulative goal of most media. Just as "sex sells," the more sensational a story or salacious the topic the more likely it is for a story to go "viral." Traditional media (*e.g.* newspapers, radio, and television) have worked to make their reporting more "sexy" in an effort to remain relevant and to avoid obsolescence in the internet age. However, in selling "sexy" there is a fine line between that which is attractive and of interest to the beholder and that which is obscene ("having a tendency to deprave or corrupt").

The storyline from the earlier sit-com makes a full circle to explain the significance of an acronym, "F.A.C.T.," which was written on the chalkboard by the teacher earlier in the episode. The acronym was a short-hand method for evaluating a story and assuring journalistic integrity. The individual letters stood for: "Fast" – "Accurate" – "Concise" – "True."

Arguably, today's media, except in the most egregious of circumstances, succeed in applying the first three (3) of the four (4) elements. Two of the elements are met primarily out of necessity. News stories must be "fast" in order to feed the continuous news cycle. The stories are generally "concise" so as to be easily digested by a distracted and often disinterested audience. At first glance, the other two (2) elements, "accurate" and "true," may seem synonymous; however, it was the important distinction between the two that was the crux of the storyline and that illustrated the difference between gossip and journalism.

The headline in fact was “accurate,” the teacher had been arrested on suspicion of possession of cocaine. He had been arrested among several others, most of whom were guilty of the charges alleged. Using present-day criteria for publication, the rush to print the article in the student newspaper was certainly defensible: It was of interest to the reader; it would be widely circulated; and the facts were essentially accurate as stated in the story.

What was missing from the story (and which did not come to light until Jo spoke directly to the teacher after publication) was the explanation that the teacher had gone to the party to drive a friend home, that teacher did not use drugs, and that he was subsequently released by the police with the charges having been dropped. However, by that time, the “truth” of the situation was irrelevant. He had been found guilty in the court of public opinion. No explanation or retraction could undo the damage to him or restore his reputation (or his teaching position).

It is important to remember the power of media to influence the perception of what is true. It should not be enough to argue that the statement or story was technically true (or worse yet, not intentionally false). It should be the objective of journalists to assure that the perceptions and implications taken away by the audience are unadulterated and without distortion.

It is impossible to have a “F.A.C.T.” without “Truth.” Much of today’s media would argue that the “T” is not important. They would argue that theirs is not the duty to divine cosmic “truth” but only to report what they deem “newsworthy.” If media assumes as its role the regurgitation of innuendo and gossip, then that objective is fulfilled by publishing anything that is arguably defensible and likely to withstand a charge of libel. However, “Truth” should be the objective of professional journalists, regardless of whether such truths are readily apparent or whether distillation requires concerted effort and investigation. Let us hope that in the rush to make a deadline and to cash in on a story, truth is not an inevitable casualty.

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