



Why They Get It Wrong

LIKE AN IDIOT, I once enrolled in journalism school, and although I made it about halfway through the time required to get a master's degree, I didn't learn much in the way of journalistic know-how. To tell the truth, there's not much to learn. The techniques required for a life in journalism are, for most bipeds, second nature: dialing the phone, talking on the phone, finding documents, reading documents, going to events, staying awake at events, writing out notes, organizing notes, and then (this is the tough one) touch-typing.

If journalism professors don't teach much journalism per se, they do teach quite a bit *about* journalism. One of the skills a future journalist will find essential

is the ability to maintain a particularly romantic conception of his trade, its purposes and its past. He learns, for starters, not to call it a "trade"; we prefer to think of it as a "profession." He learns he is heir to a long and honored tradition and may one day, if he's lucky and dutiful, be a candidate himself for the pantheon of hacks, where the heroic roll is called from John Peter Zenger to Tom Paine to Elijah P. Lovejoy, from Upton Sinclair to Ernie Pyle and Edward R. Murrow, up to the legends of the recent past, to (hushed tones) Walter Cronkite, David Halberstam, and Woodward and Bernstein. The reporter-to-be learns that each was a *beau ideal* of journalism, a man who confronted authority unafraid, comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable while maintaining a depthless reservoir of fellow feeling, an exquisite cultural sensitivity, and a trembling social conscience.

Having been there and done that, I was astonished to come across an advance copy of *Getting It Wrong*:

ANDREW FERGUSON, *our media columnist*, wrote last month about Fox News and Howell Raines.

Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism and to discover that it was written by a professor of (among other things) journalism, W. Joseph Campbell, of American University. *Getting It Wrong* will be published next month by University of California Press. It may be the best book about journalism in recent memory; it is certainly the most subversive. And it is blessedly free of the kind of deep thinking about the Larger Questions to which journalism pros are disastrously susceptible. When

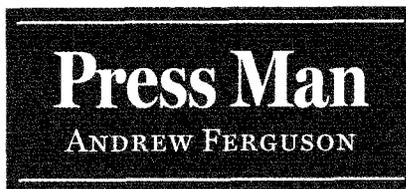
Professor Campbell calls his misreported stories "media-driven myths," he is not using "myth" in the high-brow sense, as the other Joseph Campbell used to do, to describe a cultural story whose significance transcends truth or

accuracy. This professor Campbell uses *myth* the straightforward way, to mean a story that's not true, no matter how emphatically journalists want it to be.

The first task of a daily reporter and his editor is to decide what is and isn't newsworthy, and a botched story can reveal the passions—some of them ideological, others peculiar to the demands of the trade—that play across the mind and heart of the journalist at work. Sometimes several of these urges collide at once, in a kind of rock-scissors-paper struggle for dominance. Recent history provides plenty of examples. You may have noticed, since the Iraq war began in 2003, a surprising shortage of stories about battlefield heroism, once a staple of war reporting. It wasn't for lack of material. Bush administration flacks worked tirelessly to seed American news outlets with heroic tales, but they had little to show for their efforts. In 2005 the conservative group Media Research Center sifted through 1,300 network news stories and found eight that dealt with the valor of American troops.

You can almost hear the collision of values in the journalistic mind: the primal need for drama and uplift was overridden

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by a fear of being caught cheerleading for a war that most editors disliked, waged by a president they despised. Scissors cut paper, as the old game has it, and tales of heroism were deemed not news. The most famous exception involved Private Jessica Lynch. Four days into the Iraq invasion, the *Washington Post* reported that Lynch, an Army supply clerk, had shot several enemy soldiers during an ambush before being taken prisoner, despite receiving multiple wounds herself. Imagine how Lynch's story compounded the journalistic pickle. Along with his deep suspicion of American military power, a reporter in good standing is also a sucker for the Annie Oakley claims of feminism ("Anything you can do, I can do better"). And feminists, despite their anti-war views, are particularly affronted by the military's ban on women in combat: America, they believe, will never live out the full meaning of its creed until women are as empowered as men to commit war crimes against indigenous peoples.

In the case of Private Lynch, rock smashed scissors. Feminism conquered the aversion to militaristic rah-rah, and Lynch's exploits became the biggest story of the war's early days. A member of *USA Today's* board of contributors, Robin Gerber, laid out the theme explicitly. Lynch, she wrote, was "the latest in a long line of women who prove their sex's capacity for steely heroism." Inconveniently, the *Post's* story proved false in every heroic particular, as was soon discovered by rival news organizations where the anti-war scissors somehow clobbered the rock of institutional feminism. And so the press's gullibility swung all the way back. Not only was Lynch not a hero, the BBC reported; the Pentagon had staged her dramatic rescue for TV cameras as a piece of face-saving propaganda. The BBC story was no more factual than the original *Post* story, though it was longer lived and far more pernicious.

The urge to turn news into special pleading—to recast events as evidence for the rightness of a cause—is especially hard to resist when the cause involves one's own line of work. The farthest fetched of

journalism's misreported stories are about journalism itself. Campbell does what journalists, and most journalism professors, seldom think to do when they exchange the oft-repeated tales: he checks them out. And through a pitiless accretion of detail, he dissolves them one by one.

As he reveals, Edward R. Murrow did not "bring down Joe McCarthy" with his famous 1954 episode of *See It Now*; Campbell looked up the poll numbers and found that McCarthy's favorability ratings were in free fall well before Murrow took to the air. No, Cronkite did not turn the public against the Vietnam War with an on-air editorial in February 1968: five months earlier, Gallup had registered that a plurality of Americans, 47 percent, agreed that the war was a mistake. And no, Woodward and Bernstein were not responsible for uncovering the entirety of the Watergate scandal; as reporters, they

had pretty much run out of scoops by October 1972, when congressional investigators, criminal prosecutors, and other newspapers took over the story and drove it till President Nixon's resignation in August 1974. And no, the bestselling author David Halberstam, who promoted each of these stories with unflinching pomposity, was not a reliable chronicler of even the most recent past.

Journalism's myths about journalism, you'll notice, are self-aggrandizing. They cast the journalist as hero. No wonder they're so popular...among journalists. We warm ourselves by such tales, draw compensation and comfort from them, which is why they're taught in our trade schools as elements of basic training. A hack's career might be filled with close shaves, deflated by the disregard or indifference of the customers, marred by boredom and occasional disillusionment and lousy pay, but through it all, history tells us, journalism remains a uniquely noble calling, the calling of Murrow and Cronkite and the other giants on whose shoulders today's journalists stand, however uncertainly. Here, at least, the commotion of competing passions is stilled, replaced by a serene harmony. Some stories are too good to check. \$►

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