

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

W. Joseph Campbell. *Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xiii + 269 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25566-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-26209-6.

Reviewed by Jeanette McVicker (SUNY-Fredonia)

Published on Jhistory (January, 2011)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker



Getting It Right: Exposing Journalism's Mythmaking Machinery

This slim, compelling book generated a minor sensation in journalism circles all summer, with good reason. Former journalist and current American University professor of journalism W. Joseph Campbell shatters ten of the most tenacious myths at the heart of American journalism, from William Randolph Hearst's alleged claim to Frederick Remington in 1897 that he would "furnish the war" with Spain, to the inflated heroics of prominent mid-twentieth-century journalists (Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Bob Woodward, and Carl Bernstein) who, single-handedly, allegedly brought down unethical politicians and/or thwarted their misguided policies. Campbell's book should be required reading for journalism students as well as journalists and editors, for it reinforces the necessity of healthy skepticism; a commitment to fully understanding the implications of one's research; and the importance of cultivating diverse, credible sources and viewpoints for probing, quality journalism. There is an even greater lesson here, however, pertinent for all readers: consistent with the rise of "modern" journalism from the late 1800s to the present, the institution of journalism has bolstered itself with narratives celebrating its own strategic importance to society, even when the narratives turn out to be fictions. Exposing that mythmaking machine and its institutional "consensus-narratives" (p. 3), Campbell seeks to restore value to American journalism even as he draws what will be, for many readers, a controversial conclusion (which this review will explore in greater depth below): "media-driven myths often emerge from an eagerness to find influence

and significance in what journalists do. These myths affirm the centrality of the news media in public life and ratify the notion the media are powerful, even decisive actors. To identify these tales as media-driven myths is to confront the reality that the news media are not the powerful agents they, and so many others, assume them to be." [1]

In each chapter, Campbell delivers pithy, well-researched correctives for each sensational claim. No, Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast did not induce a national panic in October 1938. Yes, there was symbolic bra burning in the Freedom Trash Can at the 1968 protest of the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, but no mass stripping of undergarments by wild women's liberationists. No, the Kennedy administration did not request the *New York Times* to spike or delay a report on the imminent Bay of Pigs invasion: "utter fancy," Campbell writes (p. 70). Even more penetrating are Campbell's exposures of pack journalism and overreliance on anecdotal reporting, as in the "crack baby epidemic" stories of the 1980s (he titles this chapter "The Fantasy Panic") and the media transformation of Private Jessica Lynch into the blonde war hero of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. (In reality, she never fired a shot, while the soldier who *did*—Sergeant Donald Walters, whose valiant effort to save his company resulted in his capture and execution by Iraqi forces—was barely acknowledged in the media). Campbell redresses a still-common misconception that the press became "essential again" (p. 166,

quoting *American Journalism Review's* cover story headline in October/November 2005), regaining its sense of purpose in covering the initial trauma following Hurricane Katrina. (As Campbell meticulously points out, erroneous "facts" emerged early on due to too little questioning of official sources' evidence for information, not enough firsthand reporting, and a willingness to believe negative stereotypes.)

The deconstruction of these cherished media myths by Campbell's archival, source-driven research is praiseworthy, and makes for fascinating reading. His objective "is not to apply *ex post facto* judgments and excoriate the news media for failings past," he writes. "Rather, this study aligns itself with a central objective of news gathering—that of seeking to get it right, of setting the record straight by offering searching reappraisals of some of the best-known stories journalism tells about itself" (p. 3). These media distortions, inflations, and fantasies have had genuine repercussions on cultural perceptions, ideologies, and political policies, which Campbell acknowledges. Inflated media coverage of the 1968 feminist protest, for example, helped construct a negative stereotype of women and a movement daring to challenge symbols of conventional femininity as flamboyantly angry and man hating that still infuses public perceptions of feminism. More urgently, the distorted coverage of the "fantasy panic" provided ammunition for controversial policy changes across the political spectrum (from tougher drug possession penalties to costly social programs to help addicts) while further stigmatizing the cultural perception of poor, mostly minority women. The "exaggerated" coverage of New Orleans residents raping and looting in the aftermath of Katrina's devastation reinforced vicious stereotypes about poor, mostly African American citizens, and it "had the broader effect of impugning the reputation of New Orleans and its residents," Campbell asserts, "depicting them as having shed all restraints" (p. 171). In most of these examples, the devastating legacy of the mythmaking media machine continues far beyond attempts to backpedal and correct the erroneous reporting: sensational stories tend to remain in public consciousness for years and sometimes decades.

If there is a flaw to this book, it may be that Campbell hesitates to link what he rightly outlines as the troubling effects of the media mythmaking apparatus with a sustained critique of media importance in shaping reality in the post-World War II era. His apparent hope is that "debunking media-driven myths ... can help to place questions of media influence in a more coherent, more precise context" (p. 186). Media power, he writes, "tends to be

modest, nuanced, diffused, and situational" (p. 185). Bolstered by recent analyses of media effects by writers as diverse as Robert J. Samuelson, Denis McQuail, and Herbert Gans, Campbell suggests that "the influence of the news media is typically trumped by other forces" partly because of its dispersion across so many mediums. Citing Pew Research studies reflecting that "large numbers of American are beyond media influence," choosing even "to go newsless," Campbell offers that the impact of media is actually limited (p. 186).

Really? Campbell's research demonstrates with tremendous force how discrete instances of media reporting and mythmaking have built up a golden age fallacy of journalism's self-importance, and his work goes a long way toward deflating such heroic myths and consensus-narratives at the heart of modern journalism history. But it is surely not the case that the combined effects of such narratives are "modest, nuanced, diffused, and situational" (p. 185). The failure of news organizations to challenge early on the misinformation put out by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth in the Kerry-Bush election of 2004 is but one example of how media reliance on "objectivity" created opportunities for insidious constructions of "fact." (A bizarre inversion, perhaps, of the mythmaking that accompanied the radio "panic" following Welles's 1938 Halloween stunt?) One could cite climate change reporting failures as another example of the consequences of journalists' misunderstanding of science, noted by Campbell in his chapter on the "crack baby myth" and more tellingly in his conclusion, where he cites a study claiming that "five hundred news reports on medical-related topics published and broadcast by U.S. news media in 2006-2008 found that most of the reports 'failed to adequately address costs, harms, benefits, the quality of evidence, and the existence of other options when covering health care products and procedures'" (p. 189). And then of course, there is the ongoing legacy of mainstream media's failure to hold members of the Bush administration accountable during the buildup to the invasion of Iraq, a devastating correlate to Campbell's spot-on analysis of the distorted, erroneous reporting of what was happening in the streets of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. (While Campbell references the correlation, noting that "the dominant narrative about news coverage of the hurricane was that it represented a welcome counterpoint to the supposedly hesitant and noncritical reporting in the run-up to America's war with Iraq in 2003" on page 177, that is as far as he goes with it.) The book is thus commendable for its individual analyses of particular moments of dubious

media mythologizing. But the fact that the *pattern and practice* of media-driven consensus-narratives continue, seemingly unabated, points to the necessity for another kind of critique, one Campbell shies away from.

Campbell's research is pertinent and crucial for re-assessing the methods that journalists utilize in an age awash in information (much of it fallacious and malicious), and he offers several valid conclusions that deserve wide discussion in journalism classrooms and newsrooms across the country. The repetition of these problems and the legacies they create for public policy-

making and cultural vitality suggests that there may be endemic flaws at the heart of journalism as an institution calling for more trenchant analysis.

Note

[1]. W. Joseph Campbell, "Getting It Wrong: Why Many of American Journalism's Most Cherished Stories Are Exaggerated or Apocrypha," *Huffington Post*, May 19, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/w-joseph-campbell/getting-it-wrong-why-many_b_582105.html.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Jeanette McVicker. Review of Campbell, W. Joseph, *Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31641>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.