

## We Have Met the Enemy

We have reached a point where there is no journalism for the masses. The various outlets including Radio and TV have completely succumbed to the problems inherent in the premise that news must be popular and make money. The news is to sell advertising just like sports sells advertising. The news department is a profit center just like the real estate section. News is entertainment just like well...entertainment.

One of the downsides to this premise that news is for profit is that contemporary news organizations are loath to offend one group or another politically. I am talking about major national newspapers and networks here, not Cable TV. With Cable you can target your audience so specifically that you can say pretty much what you want because it's what your target audience wants. But for the major news outlets if a large enough lobby gets organized to paint them as biased it could hurt their bottom line. You don't want to turn off a significant market share even if it means compromising the quality of your reporting. You regularly see reports on the sorry state of Health Care for the working poor "balanced" with discussion of the values of free market, for profit solutions. The health care story is news with facts, events and people to report on. Free market ideology is not news, it is philosophy. You don't include some Senator's "beliefs" or his philosophy in the body of a news story. He should be made to give speeches on his own nickel.

If this were 1939 and Hitler was just ramping up for the slaughter of millions in Europe contemporary news media would present two points of view so that no one could claim the reporting was biased. One report would detail the years of cruel and disgraceful conduct on the part of the Brown Shirts and the next report would have yet another Senator reminding us that Hitler is staunchly anti-communist. Here's the problem. The first part is reporting the news. The second part is reporting an ideology. They are not equally valuable. The second part should have no place in a news report.

Secondly, we have come to accept the idea that the news sells soap, or whatever. If it bleeds it leads. Michael Jackson is still dead. Paris Hilton is still a farce. The lifelong kidnaped is still the victim of the month. Ted still killed Mary Jo and the networks and communications corporations take it all to the bank. They go with a 'story' as long as it makes money.

There really should be the news equivalent of the famous Billboard Chart showing how the pop music hits are doing. "News" stories should be ranked according to their popularity, their progress up or down the chart and the length of time they have been in the top twenty. News stories should get awards at the end of the year but not awards for research and writing. They should get awards for how much detergent and gasoline they've sold. A news item would go platinum when it runs continuously for a month and spins off at least five gold sub-stories. Jackson is dead. Jackson's doctor killed him. Who will get custody of Prince Michael? Who owns the music? What will the autopsy show? Get the idea? The death of Michael Jackson is the archetypal Platinum News Story.

I would like to lay this all at the feet of the out of control capitalists who really don't see the point of anything except profits. No ethics, no value just profit. But it doesn't work does it? It doesn't work because it misses the single most important factor in the equation. All this junk news has to be sold to somebody. A network can't just put a pile of pabulum on the table and make money. Somebody, millions of somebodies, have to buy it. That would be US. We are the people who keep the stories alive and profitable. We are the folks who watch all the baloney again and again. We are the people who swallow it whole and come back like Oliver Twist to say, "Please sir, may I have some more?"

It's not that I'm against entertainment. Heck, I watch Steven Segal movies. I just wish we'd make a distinction, many distinctions, between news and distraction. It's not going to happen that the networks and newspapers and news organizations will come to their respective senses and return to a culture where reporting and research are valued. Those folks HAVE come to their senses. Their senses tell them that money talks and responsibility walks. Their senses tell them that we, the viewing and listening public, will pay a whole lot more for stories that stimulate than we will for real news.

We have met the enemy and they are us.