A GLOBAL VILLAGE OF POSTER CHILDREN:
THE BODY AS SYMBOL IN CONTEMPORARY NEWS MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the role of the news media in turning certain persons into sites of larger social, cultural, and/or political meaning. The purpose of any news outlet, be it a print, television, or web-based production, is to produce information regardless of whether or not anything of genuine importance has occurred. Also, as Neil Postman has pointed out, the news must also entertain in order to attract an audience. This being the case, when a person such as Michael Fay or Terri Schiavo enters news discourse, production requirements necessitate that this person be examined from multiple angles, discussed and debated so as to make copy for the news outlet. In turn, this allows that person to take on symbolic meaning. For example, when Michael Fay became the focus of news media in spring of 1994 after being sentenced to receive a caning for vandalizing cars in Singapore, there was very little fresh information to report upon throughout the progression of his case. Hence, reporters focused upon the debates over corporal punishment surrounding Michael Fay, which in turn made Fay himself become a living embodiment of this conflict. Multiple persons like Fay permeate news discourse. Baby Jessica, Lorena Bobbitt, Terri Schiavo—these are just a few of the names that have been subjects of conversation in the mass media over the years. Ultimately, this thesis will conclude that the news media maintains popular appeal by their focus on such individuals—those whose bodies can be made to symbolize contemporary, culturally relevant concerns.
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INTRODUCTION

When sitting down with the day’s newspaper, it is not too uncommon to find prominent stories featuring people whom many readers have probably never met, and more than likely, will never meet. This is to be expected, since most of us are probably not close friends with world leaders, prominent businessmen, celebrities, and other members of the rich and the famous. So let there be an addendum to the first statement: it is not too uncommon to find stories about people who, without the aid of the news media, would receive little to no public recognition whatsoever. Think of some of the figures that have made national headlines over the past several decades. There was Baby Jessica, the girl who was rescued after falling down a well; Bernie Goetz, the man who shot and killed four black youth while riding a subway train in New York City; Lorena Bobbitt, the woman who cut off her husband John Bobbitt’s penis in a fit of rage; Mary Kay Latourno, the teacher who had an affair with her sixth grade student; and Matthew Shepard, a young gay man who was beaten and murdered for being homosexual. The list stops here lest it become a monstrosity. So many people have gained, for lack of a better term, minor celebrity through the news media that it would make a good subject for an encyclopedic work.

Nevertheless, one must wonder why, given the innumerable amount of events and occurrences that must happen on any given day, so many unknowns can make national headlines. There is a quite obvious reason as to why presidents and politicians routinely make the news—the actions of presidents and politicians can have an effect, whether direct or indirect, on the lives of the audience. On the other hand, the actions of John and Lorena Bobbitt, fascinating as they may have been, are of very little consequence to the
news audience. Whatever creative methods of harm they may have inflicted upon one another, their actions neither moved mountains nor opened the heavens. Life, for much of the world, continued as usual.

In short, while some of these stories may be highly intriguing, very rarely do such cases impact the lives of the news audience directly or indirectly. But while the news can be used to deliver timely, relevant, and pertinent information to the viewing audience, it is also, an entertainment product. This is the position advanced by scholars such as Neil Postman, who argues that the primary function of the news is to entertain, not to inform. He writes:

If you were the producer of a television news show for a commercial station, you would not have the option of defying television’s requirements. It would be demanded of you that you strive for the largest possible audience . . . You would try to make celebrities of your newscasters. You would advertise the show, both in the press and on television itself. You would do “news briefs,” to serve as an inducement to viewers. You would have a weatherman as comic relief, and a sportscaster whose language is a touch uncouth (as a way of his relating to the beer-drinking common man). You would, in short, package the whole event as any producer might who is in the entertainment business. (“Amusing” 106)

Postman refers here to television news, but his point could be extended to include other news mediums such as print and Internet journalism. His overall concern is that since news producers must capture a large audience in order to sell advertising, the news must therefore be made entertaining enough to attract viewers and readers. This means that
news outlets focus on some stories purely because they are fascinating, stupefying, and entertaining, but not because they are necessarily significant or important. Postman might therefore see the Lorena Bobbitts that populate newspapers and programs as further evidence of the media’s primary goal of entertaining viewers before informing them, placing more relevant, but perhaps less interesting stories behind sensational tales of lust and mutilation.

Postman is certainly correct in describing the mechanisms behind news production. Most news outlets, whether it is the small town paper or the New York Times, survive by selling advertising space. This means that the news production must capture an audience, which it then sells to the advertiser. Peppering the news with characters such as John and Lorena Bobbitt means that the final product appeals to the lowest common denominator. Everyone can appreciate a good, filthy tale of a shaky marriage that culminates in a maiming—aficionados of highbrow culture can see connections between the Bobbitt’s story and classical Greek theater, which itself had a tendency to graphically depict brutal disfigurements, whereas the more down-to-earth can say, “They remind me of a couple I saw once on The Jerry Springer Show.”

However, although newspapers and programs may be infused with a certain amount of entertainment, polish, and pizzazz, this does not mean that the news is solely comprised of sensational, out-of-the-ordinary, and largely irrelevant events. Even the above quote from Postman indicates his own recognition that the news contains a great deal of variety. Some news content might be adequately described as “fluff,” but it is a mistake to assume that all news content consists purely of soap opera melodramas and insipid discourse. No matter how dressed up, dumbed down, and/or polished information
may be, it is still information nevertheless. Moreover, incorporating entertaining but irrelevant stories within the news may work to attract readers who might not otherwise care about the news, which may in turn encourage such readers to consume the more “nutritious” portions of the news product.

In almost direct opposition to Postman, cultural studies scholar John Fiske argues that news should strive to make information “popular,” thereby making world events more accessible to a wide audience. He writes:

It (news) should, therefore, be evaluated less by informational criteria and more by those of popular appeal. We should demand of our television news that it make the events of the world popular, that it subject them to popular taste and attempt to make them part of the popular conscious of society. (185)

Fiske might therefore contend that the incorporation of sensational stories about out-of-the-ordinary people within news productions helps gather an audience that might otherwise have little interest in world events. But also, even a seemingly meaningless story can help generate awareness and conversation about important social, cultural, and political concerns. Thus, a story about Lorena and John Bobbitt may be a shockingly perverse tale of a troubled marriage (to say the least), but it is also a means of generating talk about spousal abuse, the state of marital relations in the United States, and other more serious and far more involved matters.

Considering this idea, the argument advanced in this essay is a fairly simple one. When a person, for whatever reason, becomes the subject of mainstream news media, that person has the potential to become a symbol for larger cultural, social, and political conditions. Regardless of whether or not the news is packaged as an entertainment
product, persons entering news conversation inevitably gain symbolic weight, and often become the personification of more complex issues. This, in turn, allows members of the news media to generate in-depth discussions of more complicated phenomena.

The first chapter will focus primarily the political economic foundations and aesthetic properties of the news genre. This chapter will give a brief history of the progression of the news industry in America. This history is one in which newspapers gradually relied more upon advertising as a primary source of funding rather than purchase-price. Newspapers gradually became a mass medium that sought to gather a large audience—one that preferably had enough buying power—which would in turn encourage advertisers to buy ad-space. This shift however, was not simply an economic one, but rather, involved a change in journalism itself. News was no longer to be sensational or polemical, as it was in the days of early colonial America, but professional and objective. But also, since news had to pander to a mass audience, stories had to contain dramatic flair and sensational appeal, even though journalists were expected to be objective in their reporting style. This is not to say that news outlets stopped covering relevant but perhaps less exciting world events, but rather, news outlets saw a necessity in incorporating stories within the news product that were exciting and viscerally stimulating, even if these stories had little significance or relevance to the audience. Hence, the success of advertising-driven mass media widened the spectrum of that which was considered “news.” Furthermore, the financial success of this system meant that news was now being produced on a daily basis, regardless of whether anything of genuine importance had occurred or not.
A contemporary story, which provides an example of both the news media’s proclivity towards covering sensational stories as well as its necessary drive to produce news even during an apparent absence of events to cover, involves Bobbi McCaughey, a woman from Carlisle, Iowa, who made headlines in late 1997 when, after using a fertility drug, became pregnant with septuplets. This event was not, of course, newsworthy because of its wide-ranging relevance. Very few couples need worry about producing seven children at once. Nonetheless, the story had both sensational undertones and dramatic elements—ones that journalists could emphasize and speculate upon in order to sustain news production. In spite of the fact that doctors predicted that Bobbi would give birth successfully to the septuplets, news articles building up to the birth often focused on the dangers and potential complications that could have occurred during the birth of the septuplets. The McCaughey septuplets narrative thus gives a recent manifestation of a sensational, melodramatic news story, which journalists can focus upon for a period of days, examining various angles so as to produce news content and enhance the dramatic appeal of the story itself.

The second chapter will focus more in depth on another story involving a young man named Michael Fay. While living with his mother and stepfather in Singapore, Fay had been convicted of vandalism and was sentenced to receive six lashes with a wet cane. The U. S. government appealed to Singapore to remove the sentence. Singapore responded by reducing the sentence to four lashes, and Fay inevitably received the caning. Like the case of the McCaughey septuplets, journalists had to search for an angle to the Michael Fay case that would keep the news audience entertained, especially during periods when little was happening in the story. Thus, the series of news articles
concerning the Michael Fay story progressively focused more on the debates over corporal punishment that were taking place because of his caning, and less on the actual circumstances of Fay himself. Using several articles from USA TODAY, this chapter will track the narrative progression of the Michael Fay story, showing how articles gradually focused less attention on Fay’s ordeal and more attention on the debate over corporal punishment. As a result of media emphasis on the debates over corporal punishment, Fay himself became symbolic for this conflict. Michael Fay would gradually become synonymous with arguments both for and against corporal punishment, and his name would appear in later articles that discussed the merits and disadvantages of this practice, but had little connection to the original Michael Fay story.

The third and final chapter will focus on the case of Terri Schiavo, a comatose woman who had survived via life support for most of her adult life. Her parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, and husband Michael Schiavo had battled for years over Terri. Michael wanted to take his wife off life support by removing her feeding tube, contending that Terri would not have wanted to live in such a state. Her parents held hope that Terri would eventually recover from her condition and wanted the feeding tube to remain in place. Terri Schiavo would eventually be taken off life support and become the center of media frenzy, with commentators, politicians, and other outsiders involving themselves in the ordeal. Through news discourse, Terri Schiavo, like Michael Fay, was discussed as being a living symbol of various concepts—the importance of making a living will, the interfamilial battles that can occur during the death of a loved one, and the question as to what constitutes “life” itself. So much so was Schiavo discussed as the representation these issues that her body actually became the site of a political conflict, as outsiders
attempted to intervene on her behalf, while others strongly vocalized their opposition to this intervention.

The Schiavo story thus represents the ultimate merging of news production and the body as a symbolic site. The news media’s construction of an enthralling and dramatic story about Terri Schiavo had also elevated her body to the level of symbol, wherein the news audience was routinely encouraged to think of her body as the material representation of the aforementioned concepts. In turn, whatever happened to her body specifically—whether she remained on life support or was allowed to die—would be either an affirmation or violation of the core beliefs of the news audience, depending on how members interpreted the body of Terri Schiavo. Henceforth, the news media, having promoted an understanding of Terri Schiavo as a living representation of various life-and-death concerns, simultaneously encouraged the news audience to take an interpersonal interest in her body and its care. This created prime conditions for a political struggle to occur over her body, since any action on her behalf, whether this meant preventing or supporting the removal or her feeding tube, would not only be sure to resonate in some way with the national audience, but would also be a physical representation of political beliefs concerning right-to-life/right-to-die issues.

Overall, the purpose of this essay is to show that the news media works to actively construct persons such as Michael Fay and Terri Schiavo as metaphors for various social, political, and cultural issues. For sake of continuity, all chapters will use news articles gathered from USA TODAY as the primary texts, which will provide a representative example of how any given news media outlet can construct a narrative over an extended period of time. Also, it is worth noting that the works of Neil Postman and Daniel
Boorstin will be referred to frequently throughout this thesis, as the works of these two scholars provide the primary theoretical backbone for the work. Postman advances the argument that news primarily functions as an entertainment vehicle, while Boorstin contends that the news relies on fabricated “events” to create content. Combined, these theories help to advance the position that the “poster child,” the Michael Fays and Terri Schiavos that populate news coverage, can function as a vehicle for discussing and presenting complex cultural issues to a mass audience.

Tracking the narratives of the McCaughey septuplets, Michael Fay, and Terri Schiavo will show how the news media works to produce dramatic stories about particular individuals so as to capture audience interest. But also, an examination of news media production about people such as Michael Fay and Terri Schiavo reveals that such individuals often become representative examples of much larger issues. Although it may be questioned why the media would choose to focus on these individuals in lieu of covering more widely-relevant events, this essay intends to show that by using such persons as symbols for deeper political, social, and cultural concerns, the news media can disseminate useful information to the public, as well as encourage more complex debate over the issues that the examined person is said to symbolize. However, examples such as the Terri Schiavo case demonstrate a potential danger in the news media’s emphasizing certain persons as being symbolic of particular cultural concerns; the news media can emphasize the symbolic power of a person as being so great, that it leaves the door open for their bodies to be used as battlegrounds upon which political wars can be waged.
SUSTAINING NEWS PRODUCTION
THROUGH THE CONSTRUCTION OF EVENTS

In regards to the content of daily newspapers, Marshall McLuhan writes: “Take off the dateline, and one day’s paper is the same as the next” (190). McLuhan pokes fun at a medium, which although claiming to cover those events that are “new,” still seems repetitive. The content of the newspaper, to be sure, is predictable: murder, tragedy, war, death, scandal, unseasonable warmth, famine, lottery winners. Occasionally, a new president gets elected, a new sports star is on the rise, or a new serial killer is on the loose, all of which keep things mildly interesting. But even during ostensibly monumental events, it often seems that it is the characters who are the only elements that change in an otherwise predictable story. Television news is, of course, not much different. A day spent watching CNN feels like being caught in a godless infinity loop: another dimension where the rules of time and space no longer apply and the same events keep happening over and over again.

Yet, the narrative presentation of news seeks to mask the repetition. Professional standards require journalists to be objective when covering events, while economic necessity requires that news attract an audience, which will in turn encourage advertisers to purchase space throughout the news product. This means that although professionalism requires that events must be reported in an objective fashion, they must also possess entertainment value. This chapter will examine how the economics underlying contemporary mainstream journalism affects the narrative presentation of events covered within mainstream news. Critics such as Ben Bagdikan, Noam Chomsky, and Robert McChesney argue that an advertising-funded mass media backed by corporate
business interests results in uncritical, apolitical journalism that tends to support the
status quo. These criticisms, although valuable in revealing how news media perpetuate
prevailing political, business, and cultural ideology, tend to ignore the effect economic
necessity has on narrative presentation of events by mainstream news media. News must
always capture an audience, so stories must always entertain the audience. This being the
case, news media prefers to focus on events that are unique, exciting, and dramatic rather
than events that are necessarily relevant to a large portion of the audience. Scholars such
as Neil Postman and Daniel Boorstin even argue that in order to capture a mass audience,
news media does not simply focus on events that are unique, exciting and dramatic, but
actually work to produce events that are unique, exciting and dramatic. One such
example, a story appearing in 1997 about mother who gave birth to a set of septuplets,
was not only a unique occurrence in and of itself, but also an occurrence that reporters
could infuse with elements of suspense and high drama so as to attract and keep the
attention of the audience. Using this story as an illustration, this chapter will show how
contemporary news media, rather than simply offering transparent accounts of events,
actually engage in the production of entertaining events for dissemination and
consumption by a mass audience.

The Search for a Mass Audience

Information, it is often said, is a valuable commodity. But it is not simply the
case that information, whatever it may be, has an intrinsic value of its own. Rather, as
with any product, information is made valuable by market demand. So when it is said
that information is a valuable commodity, then it must be asked: valuable to whom? In
regards to news media, it is now the case that information is marketed towards and packaged for a general audience, comprised of diverse groups and interests. This was not always the case. As authors Jean Folkerts and Dwight Teeter argue in their history of American mass communication, during the days of early colonial America to about the late nineteenth century, a multiplicity of publishers targeted narrow audiences divided along political, ethnic, racial, occupational and class lines. Pennsylvanian German populations were informed by newspapers such as the *Philadelphische Zeitung*, while various French and Spanish papers targeted ethnic populations in diverse areas such as New Orleans and Boston (101 – 2). *Freedom’s Journal*, founded by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm in 1827, spoke to the needs of the African-American population, having a fairly wide circulation from Virginia to as far south as Louisiana (107). Along with these papers, Folkerts and Teeter report that roughly fifty “labor weeklies” circulated in the United States during the 1820s and 30s that catered specifically to working-class audiences (102 – 3). Moreover, newspapers were often highly political, openly supporting particular candidates, parties, issues, and concerns (Folkerts 95 – 9). In all such examples then, publishers sought to package information according to the desires of specific groups. In terms of financing, readers, political parties, and other organizations provided the financial support for such publications.

It was not until the emergence of the penny press in the 1830s that advertising took a more prominent role in newspaper production (Folkerts 117). Unlike their predecessors, the penny press papers were financed mostly through the selling of commercial space (116 – 7). Advertising kept prices low, making papers more affordable, which in turn increased circulation and allowed advertisers to reach a wider
Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the increasing connectivity of the nation through communication technologies meant that both publishers and advertisers could reach an even larger audience (240, 244). Magazines such as the *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* were some of the first publications to utilize advertising in order to lower subscription rates and expand audience size (247). Likewise, newspapers during this period “now depended on large circulations and expanded advertising bases” for their primary means of financial support (252).

The economics behind print communication having thus changed, the responsibilities of the newspaper changed as well. “As corporate capitalism became firmly entrenched,” Folkerts and Teeters write, “publishers began to conceive of themselves not only as political and cultural voices but as extensions of the nation’s marketing system” (243). Now that publications survived by collecting audiences for advertisers, the general newspaper could not afford to target specific segments of the population. Publishers thus developed new methods of journalism in order to reach a mass audience. The authors write:

Newspapers chose a variety of paths along a continuum from sensationalism and entertainment to information and fact-finding. Some newspapers jumped on the successful Hearst-Pulitzer bandwagon. Others shunned parts or all of it and remained graphically, editorially, and politically conservative. Almost all newspapers, however, became distinct parts of the business communities they served. (252 – 3)

Whether the newspaper took a dramatic, sensational approach or a more sober, “objective” one, it was always necessary that the mainstream publication speak in a tone
suited to general tastes. But by no means could a paper that survived by the sale of commercial space speak to the needs of particular class, racial, political, or occupational groups, lest they risk alienating and losing large portions of the potential audience.

In this sense, it was valuable for a mainstream newspaper to avoid taking political stances that might push away key demographics (the middle to upper class audience) or offend parts of the business community. “If a paper wished to attract maximum advertising, its explicit politics might create a disadvantage,” writes journalism professor and media critic Benjamin Bagdikan, “So it found it advantageous to tone down or make less obvious strong political statements” (129). The new professional doctrine of objectivity helped in part to reduce sensationalism, although sensationalist reporting still existed in the form of dramatic headlines, flashy graphics, and tales of scandal, crime, and intrigue. But also, the objective style forced journalists to adhere to strictly factual reporting, limiting the amount of overly political, partisan, and polemical material in the news.

Some scholars argue however, that the development of an advertising-supported mainstream press typically placed business interests ahead of professional standards of objectivity. Communications professor Robert W. McChesney writes:

Professional journalism’s mission was to make a capitalist, advertising-supported media system seem—at least superficially—to be an objective source of news to many citizens . . . On the one hand, the commercial requirements for media content to satisfy media owners and advertisers were built implicitly into the professional ideology . . . On the other hand, corporate
activities and the affairs of the wealthy were not subject to the same degree of scrutiny as government practices . . . (13 – 4)

Similarly, Bagdikan argues that mainstream reporters can often do little more than repeat basic facts and “the words of authority figures,” but are not free to offer a coherent analysis of current events (180). Both Bagdikan and McChesney thus see an inherent bias built into professional journalism that distorts the objectivity journalists themselves purport to uphold. In some cases, the business interests of mainstream media can sometimes directly interfere with news content itself. For example, after Ms. magazine published a brief report on congressional hearings concerning the presence of possible carcinogens in beauty products, Clairol began to pull advertising from the publication (Steinem 193). Businesses can thus retaliate against publishers if they run reports that disparage or conflict with corporate interests. However, as critics have argued, this is rarely necessary because self-censorship is already built into the professional ideology of mainstream publishing. As media critic Dallas Smythe remarks, advertisers rarely need to strike back against publishers, “because the editorial policy of the media selects people for employment and predetermines the limits of what is ‘acceptable’ editorial content” (265). Thus, although the professional reporting style may be “objective,” business interests inevitably restrict topic selection, limit divergent editorial viewpoints, and avoid explicitly political topics so as to ensure that news content does not conflict with the economic and political interests of mainstream media.

In Manufacturing Consent, authors Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman advance perhaps the strongest political economic critique of mainstream mass media in regards to journalistic objectivity. The authors argue that although there exist no formal censorship
restraints that prohibit publication of particular stories, the mass media nevertheless restrict news content based on informal controls, which in turn shapes popular knowledge and public opinion. These controls, or “filters” as the authors call them, allows for a system of information dissemination “by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public” (2). The five filters include: continuance of the private, profit-oriented interests of the mass media; dependence on advertising as the main source of revenue; reliance on outside government and business sources for news material; avoidance of stories that generate criticism; and an overall “ideology of anticommunism” that focuses on national enemies and deflects criticism from domestic government and business institutions (2, 29). The authors note that although the news media will occasionally produce stories that challenge dominant business and government interests, for the most part, mainstream news media simply cannot afford to engage in discussions that will offend corporate sponsors or challenge the status quo. They write:

Large corporate advertisers on television will rarely sponsor programs that engage in serious criticisms of corporate activities, such as the problem of environmental degradation, the workings of the military industrial complex, or corporate support of and benefits from Third World tyrannies. (17)

Also, in this system of corporate-funded media, more radical, working-class, and inflammatory newspapers and/or programs do not achieve mainstream success because advertisers generally will not support media forms that criticize business interests (15 – 16). Overall, Chomsky and Herman, like the previously mentioned scholars, argue that
the economic underpinnings of mainstream news inevitably limits public understanding of certain issues and events by forcing journalists to write in an apolitical, deferential, and uncritical style.

In spite of these aforementioned criticisms, the marriage of news media and advertising has been beneficial in certain regards. Although sensationalism can still be found in contemporary news media, professional journalistic standards tend to frown upon sensational, embellished stories that were the trademark of the William Randolph Hearst papers and other yellow rags of the early twentieth century. Such an approach has been traded in for a comparatively more staid and subdued journalistic style. However, as the political economic approach reveals, the modern system of advertising-funded media has also resulted in a shift in the way news producers conceptualize the audience. In the minds of news publishers, the audience was neither black nor white, leftist nor conservative, working class nor professional, rich nor poor. Rather, the audience was one mass of generic consumers. Catering to any one group’s particular interests would ultimately shut out the rest of the potential audience. The new objective style of news reporting catered to nobody in particular, and thus spoke to everyone at once.

However, the political economic approach, although useful for examining the relationship between the economic and political interests of the mass media and news content, nonetheless fails to show how the news media works to attract this audience and maintain popular appeal. First, many of the criticisms are far too production-centered and overly deterministic in regards to reader interpretation. In his essay, “Encoding/Decoding,” cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argues against analyses that focus solely on media production without paying respect to the possibility that the
audience can bring their own interpretations to the media text. “[T]he production process,” Hall argues, “is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies . . . and so on frame the constitution of the programme through the production structure” (167). However, the communication process is never fully complete until the audience receives and interprets the media text. While some audience members might accept the news media’s interpretation of any given event, other readers might take the “oppositional position” and interpret the text in a far different manner than was intended by the producer, thereby rejecting the dominant message (174 – 5). Another possible reading position that Hall outlines, the “negotiated position,” “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements,” recognizing the dominant message as legitimate, but nevertheless reinterpreting some elements of the encoded meaning to fit that person’s own ideological viewpoint. It is not simply the case, however, that people imbibe and digest media content with little thought, examination, or reflection upon the nature of that content. In this sense, a purely production-centered approach, which political economic critics tend to advance, cannot account for how news media consumers make their own meanings and formulate their own opinions when consuming media texts.

Second, the political economic approach also denies readers the agency to utilize other sources of information outside mainstream news. Even in an age of increasing media concentration, foreign press, independent media, public broadcasting, and other sources all provide alternatives to major papers and network news. While corporate-backed, advertising-funded news may dominate audience attention and set standards for the business, it would be negligent to ignore the possibility that readers could utilize
different sources to obtain information, or to assume that audiences limit themselves to a single news media source.

Finally, although the political economic approach is useful for revealing how economic incentives may shape news content, this approach does little to advance a genuine understanding of how mainstream media might utilize certain narrative or aesthetic techniques in order to make the news product appealing to a mass audience. Intended for mass consumption, news media must always entertain the audience. It should then be asked how the aesthetic and narrative presentation of news works to appeal to the mass audience and sustain audience interest. Political economic critics tend to care more about potential ideological masking and manipulation over media form and presentation. But since mainstream news must always entertain and interest the reader in order to survive, there seems to be more room for criticism and debate in mainstream American news than critics such as Chomsky and Bagdikan wish to allow, if for no other reason than the populist appeal of the shocking exposé or the fiery debate. Whatever the case may be, it is necessary to look at critics who focus more on the presentation and form of contemporary mainstream American journalism in order to better understand how economic necessity affects the aesthetic and narrative conventions of news media. Critics such as Neil Postman and Daniel Boorstin have argued that the news media tends to focus upon erratic, dramatic, and sensational events so as to attract a large audience. And if there is nothing erratic or dramatic to report, journalists must infuse drama within their report, thereby enhancing the level of suspense, and in turn, generating audience interest and consumption of the news product.
News as Entertainment Production

All journalism is a form of storytelling, and storytelling is not something that journalists themselves invented. “Storytelling” is a term that is sometimes used in the pejorative sense—someone might be referred to as a storyteller if he or she frequently lies or grossly exaggerates the truth. This is not how the term is used here. Normal, everyday language typically includes the use of multiple storytelling techniques. Use of metaphors, exaggeration, emphasis, and so forth are all devices that ordinary speakers utilize to describe events. Some scholars have thus debated the extent to which narratives can even accurately describe external reality. Consider briefly, that when any person (whether a journalist or otherwise) talks about an event, that person is engaged in the active construction of the event itself. Folklorist Richard Bauman argues that events are “organized by relationships of causality, temporality, and other such linkages,” whereas “narratives are verbal structures, organized by rules of discourse” (5). In other words, events themselves are objective happenings while narratives are subjective, personal interpretations of these events. Furthermore, Bauman argues against the understanding of an event as being the “external referents” for a narrative, but rather, asserts that events themselves are “abstractions from narrative.” This means that in recounting an occurrence, the speaker actively crafts an “event,” offering both an interpretation of the occurrence and drawing connections between various happenings in order to construct a coherent episode.

Imagine, as a hypothetical example, that a man wakes up one morning late for work because his alarm clock stopped working in the middle of the night. He quickly showers, dresses, and starts his car to leave when he sees the engine light is blinking. He
takes his car to a repair shop, finds out that it is the light itself that has malfunctioned, and goes off to work. Now suppose that the man relates this series of occurrences to three different people—the mechanic, his boss, and a coworker. While speaking to the mechanic, the man might frame the event as an “emergency,” playing upon the sympathies of the listener so that the mechanic might work on the man’s car more efficiently than he otherwise would have. But when speaking to his boss, the event might become something different—a series of unfortunate malfunctions beyond the man’s control that he assures his boss will never happen again. And when speaking with his friends, the event might become a humorous episode in which the man was at the mercy of technology. In all cases, the narratives draw bits and pieces of incidents from a single external reality. However, the “events” in each case are different, because the context shifts when a different listener is present. This is not to say that there is no objective reality, or that each respective listener cannot piece together bits of the occurrence that has taken place. This does nevertheless suggest that speakers—by inserting or extracting certain pieces of information or offering their own interpretations of the occurrence—can often guide how the listener understands the event that has taken place.

Extending Bauman’s logic to news media production, on any given day there occurs numerous objective happenings within the world upon which the news media can choose to report. However, reporting, like all forms of human speech, is an active interpretation of events, not a transparent account of reality as it has occurred. While economic and government interests may impose informal restraints on media discourse, they are not the sole limitation upon objective speech in the news media. Journalists, whenever they write accounts of objective happenings, are engaged in the construction
and understanding of an event: framing the occurrence in a particular light, using certain
descriptive words over others, bringing in characters, emphasizing conflicts, and so forth.
The journalist is not a looking glass, but a storyteller, one who makes choices while
narrating and in doing so, changes the way in which the event itself appears to have
occurred. This is not to say that the reader cannot gather reasonably accurate information
from a news story. This does, however, challenge the idea that any reporter can offer
wholly objective accounts of any given event, since storytelling necessarily involves the
interpretation and organization of information.

Like storytellers, journalists must pay respect to their audience. Listeners and
readers must be engaged, or else they will simply stop paying attention. Members of the
news media must therefore present material in such a manner that stories not only inform,
but also entertain the reader. Consider this recommendation given to aspiring reporters
by *The Associated Press Guide to News Writing*:

Much of the news is repetitive: war, crime, disaster. The goal, both in the lead
and the rest of the story, is to stress those angles that are least like routine of
other stories in this class. Often, the special element is there and writers
overlook it, losing the chance to provide their lead with that small hook that
grabs the reader. (27)

This piece of advice reflects the working conditions of the journalist. The reporter’s job
is to tell a story, and an interesting one at that. If the story does not engage the reader, the
reader is not entertained and the newspaper does not sell.

Communications scholar Neil Postman attributes the news media’s emphasis on
entertainment in reporting to the development of photographic and video technologies;
since the invention of daguerreotype, newspapers have become an increasingly visual, spectacular, and stimulating medium. Invented in 1837, over twenty years prior to the Civil War, daguerreotype allowed for the recording of images, but was also a fairly expensive process not well suited to mass reproduction (Folkerts 199 – 201). It wasn’t until the 1870’s that photographs could be regularly incorporated along with written news content, while Joseph Pulitzer made photography a staple of his papers during the 1880’s (225, 265). Photographic reproduction, gradually seeping into mass communication media such as newspapers, changed the way the public could think about events. Postman argues:

[P]hotography is a language that speaks only in particularities. Its vocabulary of images is limited to concrete representation . . . By itself, a photograph cannot deal with the unseen, the remote, the internal, the abstract. It does not speak of ‘man,’ only of a man . . . You cannot produce a photograph of ‘nature,’ any more than a photograph of ‘the sea.’ (72)

With the photograph, then, came new ways of imagining the world that were simultaneously advantageous and detrimental to the reader. Although a photograph could take any object and reproduce it with great detail, it could not convey complex thoughts or ideas with the same care or consideration as written or spoken language. The increasingly visual nature of mass communication did not then come without a price. The reverberations of the photograph would shake the complexities out of print communication, irrevocably changing the nature of the written word.

A primary problem with heavily visual culture, according to Postman, is that visuals can be used to produce the appearance of importance, relevance, and competence.
In *How to Watch TV News*, Postman and co-author Steve Powers, a television journalist, examine the inner workings of the television news genre, which they argue has more in common with the entertainment industry than some might imagine. Stations routinely hire consultants to increase the ratings of television shows, although improving the “quality” of a news show rarely involves improving reporting excellence at the station. "They [consultants] can say if an ‘on-air talent’ is likeable and a ‘good communicator’ but are usually unqualified to judge the quality of news reports,” note the authors (77). Thus, news anchors are often selected on their ability to appeal to focus groups rather than their journalistic talent or credentials (33 – 4). Likewise, standing anchors are sometimes replaced if viewers simply do not like their appearance (Postman “Amusing” 101). Likewise, the most typical team of reporters on local television stations is based on the “family concept,” consisting of a pair of male and female co-anchors supported by a team of personalities doing sports, weather and feature reporting (34 – 5). None of this enhances reporting quality, but only enhances the appearance of reporting quality. Thus, Postman and Powers contend that when a television news program needs improvement, “The usual way to proceed is by emphasizing ‘hair-spray ethics’ at the expense of solid journalism,” (77).

This heavily visual presentation of the news not only works to give the illusory appearance of credibility, but also works to stimulate the audience’s senses. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman argues that the format of the contemporary news broadcast degrades both journalistic quality and the audience’s understanding of world events by emphasizing entertainment and spectacle over serious and considerate presentation of world events. He argues that news programs seek to infuse the news with extraneous but
nonetheless exciting elements so as to entertain the audience. The appearance of the on-air journalist is important since an attractive looking reporter does more to boost ratings than a less attractive, but perhaps more qualified candidate (100 – 1). Also, news programs usually begin with bombastic music, which serves little function other than to “create a mood and provide a leitmotif for the entertainment” (102). Most problematic for Postman however, is that the news program reduces complex happenings to short, segmented stories: the average length of any given story being roughly forty-five seconds (103). This type of presentation works to keep the broadcast fast paced and visually captivating. However, Postman argues that in utilizing such a format, the television news program trades legitimate conversation and detailed discussions for stimulating aesthetics. “It is simply not possible to convey a sense of seriousness about any event if its implications are exhausted in less than one minute’s time,” he writes, adding that a majority of this time is filled with pictorial imagery as opposed to in-depth conversation.

This type of format, consisting of segmented stories and decontextualized imagery abutted against commercial breaks, creates a spectacle of world events that is both overly simplistic and incoherent at the same time. Postman writes:

I should go so far as to say that embedded in the surrealistic frame of a television news show is a theory of anticommunication, featuring a type of discourse that abandons logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction. In aesthetics, I believe the name given to this theory is Dadaism; in philosophy, nihilism; in psychiatry, schizophrenia. In the parlance of theater, it is known as vaudeville. (“Amusing” 105)
Television news, as Postman contends, juxtaposes random and disconnected against one another, with no apparent connection between any series of events, and no significant amount of time is spent discussing any specific event in particular. Postman refers to this type of discourse as a “Now . . . this” conversation—one in which “events stand alone, stripped of any connection to the past, or to the future, or to other events” (116). This mode of presentation inevitably creates a sense of indifference within the viewing audience, who comes to appreciate the news purely for its entertainment value (116 – 7).

However, this type of presentation, although perhaps best suited for television, is not solely limited to this medium. Newspapers, as previously noted, have become increasingly visual since the development of photography and other visual technologies. Critics have been especially harsh towards USA TODAY, the primary paper of analysis for this essay, for its heavy use of bright colors, photography, and graphics in order to attract readers. Calling it by the derisive nickname “McPaper,” critics ranging from Bagdikan to Postman have also charged USA TODAY with writing in an overly jubilant and unsophisticated tone so as to appeal to the lowest common denominator. However, USA TODAY is certainly not the only media outlet that values simplicity in writing. Once more, The Associated Press Guide to News Writing tells writers that text should be “plain and unadorned” (58). Long words should be replaced with short ones (17). Sentences should be short (2). Details should be limited and highly specific (80). Abstractions should be avoided (9). And, quite appropriately, the Guide reminds reporters to give “the reader a picture” (9). The written report should address the particularities of the topic and should never challenge the reader with abstract postulations, intangible ideas, or any
word that is the least bit complex. The reporter that entertains overly complex thoughts does not entertain the audience, and this is upsets the conventions of print journalism.

There is, of course, a value in simple, even entertaining writing that critics do not always recognize. A simplistic writing style ensures that a fairly diverse, heterogeneous audience with varying levels of reading ability can understand the text. More importantly, an emphasis on simplicity ensures that the reporter writes in a straightforward manner, thereby staying true to the objective style. And in regards to the criticisms against news as entertainment, John Fiske points out:

Rather than opposing “popular” news to “responsible” news, we should seek to develop a repertoire of news services, in which the main aim of the popular news might well be that of catching attention and stimulating interest. If this interest appears relevant to the social situation of the viewer-reader, he or she might then turn to other forms of news to satisfy the desire for further information. (192)

In other words, “entertaining” news might help cultivate reader interest in “serious” news.

However, the drive to entertain readers and viewers becomes quite problematic for the news media when there is an apparent lack of “interesting” events upon which to report. In his work, The Image, historian Daniel Boorstin argues that since the news media must produce content even in the apparent absence of events, the news media relies upon what he refers to as “pseudo-events,” which provide the enthralling, captivating, and dramatic content that the media so desires. The “pseudo-event” refers to occurrences that are staged and preplanned for distribution by politicians, businessmen,
public relations firms, the entertainment industry, or the news media themselves. “It [the pseudo-event] is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it,” he writes, “Typically it is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview” (11). The press conference, news release, interview, and the like are all organized events for which the news media has time to prepare and can better manage. Take, for example, the President’s State of the Union Address that occurs near the beginning of every year. Since the event has been planned, the news media can begin reporting on the event well in advance, speculating about what the President is going to discuss, what the agenda will be for the upcoming year, and what supporters and critics might say in response. This coverage works to build suspense up until the night of the event. The news media can then cover the event after it has taken place. And with all the prescience and foresight of television psychics, journalists can report on what the president has discussed, what the agenda for the upcoming year will be, and what supporters and critics have said in response, all of which had been speculated upon well before the event has taken place. But even if the event does not measure up to the speculation—if the president, supporters, or critics do not say what journalists had anticipated—this too can become newsworthy. If speculation itself is newsworthy, disproval of speculation is newsworthy as well.

It is the proliferation and prosperity of news media, as Boorstin argues, that changed the definition of what is considered “newsworthy.” The success of advertising-supported news media allowed for more frequent production: the weekly newspaper became daily, the nightly news program became a 24-hour-a-day news network. As the
frequency of news production increased, the spectrum of news widened as well. Boorstin writes:

The news gap soon became so narrow that in order to have additional ‘news’ for each new edition or each new broadcast it was necessary to plan in advance the stages by which any available news would be unveiled . . . No rest for the newsman. With more space to fill, he had to fill it ever more quickly . . . Pressures toward the making of pseudo-events became even stronger. News gathering turned into news making. (14)

Since the news media had to produce stories regardless of whatever might have occurred during the day, public figures were often all too eager to provide them with content. One such figure, Senator Joseph McCarthy, would often tell reporters that he had “important information,” even if he had none, just to receive attention in the newspapers. Reporter Richard Rovere, who worked in Washington during the McCarthy era, notes that whenever the senator claimed to have such information “This would gain him a headline in the afternoon papers: ‘New McCarthy Revelations Awaited in Capital’ (qtd. in Boorstin 22). But if McCarthy produced no information by the time of the next report, he might simply claim that he was waiting on a source. Rovere says the next headline might then read: “Delay seen in McCarthy Case—Mystery Witness Being Sought.” In such an instance, the reality was that nothing of any significance had actually occurred. Nonetheless, journalists needed something to report. With the assistance of men such as Joseph McCarthy, reporters could magically produce that something from literally nothing at all.
Boorstin thus titled his classic work, *The Image*, for this very reason: news content constituted largely from pseudo-events creates a condition in which public knowledge is dominated by illusionary truths. Predating postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, Daniel Boorstin nonetheless makes a similar argument about a postmodern world dominated by simulacra of reality. He writes: “The American citizen thus lives in a world where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity than the original” (37). Although he agrees that public officials, “movers and shakers,” have greater access to the news media, Boorstin would most likely disagree that the media simply “manufactures consent” for business and government interests, as critics such as Chomsky claim (41). Rather, the mirage world of pseudo-events is a byproduct of mass communication itself. Since print, radio, and television communication media require ceaseless production in order to survive, it is necessary that occurrences themselves become manufactured. It may be the case that politicians, businessmen, and other parties cook events for news distribution. But also, it is the forever-enduring media, always hungry for some form of content, which helps prepare the pseudo-event for consumption. This is not necessarily because the news media seeks to deceive for ideological purposes (although mass communication can indeed be used to distribute propaganda), but because news productions would fail if there were an absence of occurrences upon which to report. Pseudo-events therefore help fill the “news gap” in a lack of happenings, preventing the news from coming to a halt and the audience from becoming disinterested.

Both Boorstin and Postman are thus more concerned with technological shifts in communication than with the political economic foundations of the news media. For
Boorstin, news requires a world of pseudo-events because “round-the-clock media” need to produce news regardless of whether or not anything of genuine importance has occurred (14). For Postman, news media must always excite and entertain the audience in order to keep them interested. This means “dressing up” events, giving ordinary happenings the appearance of importance, keeping reports simplistic and short, and favoring dramatic reporting over staid and sober journalism. The pseudo-event thus fits well in Postman’s description of the news media. “Pseudo-events from their very nature tend to be more interesting and more attractive than spontaneous events,” as Boorstin argues, thereby indicating that a pseudo-event gives journalists that exciting, dramatic, captivating, and important-looking occurrence they prefer to report (37). Unlike a spontaneous occurrence, journalists can infuse a pseudo-event such as the State of the Union Address with crescendo, conflict, climax, and dénouement, while bringing in characters, emphasizing tension between various parties, and examining various points of intrigue. The result has more in common with dramatic theater than transparent narration.

Postman however, makes no distinction between pseudo-events and actual occurrences. News, as he argues, must make every event, be it preplanned or spontaneous, appear to be relevant, exciting, and dramatic. But as Boorstin warned earlier, the worlds of events and pseudo-events, information and entertainment, reality and fantasy, were all slowly collapsing. This was not necessarily an organized conspiracy, but resulted in part from the very success of mass communication technologies. He writes:
Our problem is harder to solve because it is created by people working honestly and industriously at respectable jobs . . . It is the daily product of men of good will. The media must be fed! The people must be informed! Most pleas for ‘more information’ are therefore misguided. So long as we define information as a knowledge of pseudo-events, ‘more information’ will simply multiply the symptoms without curing the disease. (36 – 7)

Nonetheless, the symptoms have indeed multiplied. News media are increasingly successful at infusing real events with as much drama and excitement as the pseudo-event.

The next section gives a short example of just such a case. In late 1997, a young couple from a small Iowa town discovered that they would soon be the proud parents of the world’s only set of septuplets. Examining a series of articles appearing in USA TODAY, this section shows how the news media can take a fairly small occurrence, one with little relevance to the general audience, and turn it into a story of mammoth proportions for the purpose of entertaining the readers. While the birth of the septuplets was by no means “staged,” many of the stories concerning the couple included build-up and speculation, thereby infusing the couple’s story with dramatic elements that were largely extraneous to the actual occurrence itself.

**The McCaughey Septuplets: An Event as Pseudo-Event**

The trick of the journalist working in the field of mainstream media is to consistently produce entertaining reports while at the same time adhering to professional standards of objectivity. Mainstream media, as discussed in the first section, survives by
selling advertising to a mass audience. This does not mean that journalists are free to
fabricate reports in order to enhance the appeal of the news. However, as Neil Postman
has pointed out, the news is as much an entertainment product as it is a communicative
tool for disseminating information. Likewise, Daniel Boorstin notes that the news must
devote time to covering pseudo-events, not only to sustain day-to-day news production,
but because pseudo-events make for exciting and interesting news content. Moreover,
the necessity of producing day-to-day news content results in the blurring of pseudo-
events and actual occurrences. The spontaneous occurrence is still of value to the
journalist. But the occurrence does not exist simply to be covered by the news media. It
exists to produce content for the news media. To ensure maximum production, the news
media must examine the event from every angle, stretch the event as far as it can go, and
beat the event for as long as it can sustain, until it finally dissipates and the next event
occurs to be put through the cycle.

Consider, as an example, one extraordinary occurrence that captured the media’s
attention for several months in late 1997. Bobbi McCaughey, a resident of the small
town of Carlisle, Iowa, had been pregnant for almost six months before checking into the
local hospital. Her condition was quite unique. After taking fertility drugs to enhance
the odds of conception, she and her husband Kenny soon discovered that Bobbi was
carrying seven children. If all children were birthed successfully, they would be the only
surviving set of septuplets in existence. Not wanting publicity, the McCaughys managed
to keep their story quiet for quite awhile. Only a few of their family members, friends,
and coworkers knew that the couple was expecting septuplets. But shortly after Bobbi
realized that labor was imminent and checked into the local hospital on October 15, word
of the couple’s story soon spread farther than the borders of the small Iowa town, becoming national news.

Luckily, Bobbi successfully gave birth to septuplets with few complications on Wednesday, November 19, 1997. However, several weeks prior to Bobbi giving birth, news media not only anticipated the arrival of the septuplets, but also speculated about potentially disastrous possibilities, particularly the chance that not all seven septuplets would survive the birthing process. In this sense, it was not the case that news media simply waited for an event to take place. Remembering Boorstin’s criticism that consistent news production requires the manufacturing of events, journalists could not wait for nature to take its course. Here then, is how one newspaper, USA TODAY, covered the McCaughey’s story from the time when news of the pregnancy first broke to when the septuplets were actually born. In a manner presumably not different from that of other news media outlets, this newspaper did not wait for birth to take place. Rather, by the time this occurred, USA TODAY had already produced four separate stories, thereby building the level of suspense and audience interest in the birth itself.

The first obtainable report from USA TODAY titled, “In Seventh Heaven: Septuplets on the Way,” appeared on October 30 of 1997. In this article, the couple is known only by their first names, Bobbi and Kenny, because the hospital would not release much information about the McCaugheys. However, as the article further reports, Kenny had given an interview to a local television station. In the interview, not only had Kenny discussed the names of his children (Alexis, Brandon, Joel, Kelsey, Kenneth, Natalie, and Nathaniel), but more importantly, he also said that there was a good chance that all seven children would be born alive and well. Kenny is quoted as saying, “They
are going to be born rather healthy, because right now we know that they’re all over 2
pounds, and the doctors have said 28 weeks is a magic line, and after 28 weeks their
chances of surviving are really, really great” (par. 12).

The purpose of this initial report is to give the audience primary knowledge of the
McCaugheys and their situation. At this point, the very fact that somewhere in the world,
a couple existed that was expecting septuplets was enough to carry the story. The
reporter, Debbie Howlett, opens the story with several terse statements: “A Carlisle,
Iowa, woman is expecting—in a big way. The woman, identified publicly only as Bobbi,
is pregnant with septuplets. That’s seven babies. All at once” (par. 1 – 4). The tone is
one of shock and disbelief, which suggests an underlying assumption that news about the
septuplets is enough to capture the audience’s attention. Little is said about the potential
risks involved in the pregnancy, both to Bobbi and the septuplets. Kenny McCaughey’s
statements even suggest that the prognosis for the septuplets looked fairly positive. In
any case, little is said regarding the potential risks because the “big news” at this point is
the very fact that a woman exists who is pregnant with septuplets. Furthermore, if Bobbi
gave birth shortly after this first report, the prognosis would have been irrelevant, since
this would be the next major news to report.

But since Bobbi did not give birth until almost three weeks later, it was necessary
to keep the audience engaged in the story and produce more information about the
McCaugheys. The next reports could not simply focus on the anticipated birth of the
septuplets—this was common knowledge and therefore, no longer exciting. It was thus
necessary that journalists examine another story element, one that would hopefully keep
the audience interested in the couple’s story. For this purpose, the best angle to report
upon was the risk involved in the delivery. Two articles appearing in the Monday, November 10, edition of USA TODAY helped craft this moment of tension in the McCaughey’s story. One article, “Iowa Mom Nears Delivery,” is a straight news story written once again by reporter Debbie Howlett. The lead informs readers that Bobbi “may deliver by Caesarean section early this week,” further noting that “Two separate media reports have speculated that the delivery is scheduled for Tuesday,” which would have been one day after this report originally appeared (par. 1 – 2). Although the hospital would not corroborate these reports, it was understood that doctors were trying to delay labor for as long as possible so that each baby could more fully develop (par. 2, 8). To be sure, this was a definite concern for the couple and for their doctors, since the less premature the septuplets were, the less health risks each would have. The couple had chosen not to abort several of the fetuses so as to increase the odds of survival among the remaining children. As Kenny McCaughey told reporters, “We just want to trust the Lord for that” (par. 7). If the delivery went smoothly, the couple would have the only living set of septuplets on the planet. The article closes by noting: “There are no known surviving sets of septuplets anywhere in the world. The last set born in the USA was in 1985. Only three of the babies survived” (par. 9).

Appearing on the same day is a front-page feature article written by Kim Painter that discussed the problems and complications that can arise with multiple births. Titled, “Risks and Costs Increase With Number of Fetuses,” the article notes that with the increasing use of fertility drugs, multiple births are a much more common occurrence. Nevertheless, complications are much more frequent with multiple births, which the article does not hesitate to remind readers. It reads:
It's (multiple births) a routine never contemplated by Mother Nature and one that some observers say has gone too far. Multiple births, largely the result of aggressive fertility treatments and dramatic advances in prenatal and newborn care, are fraught with risks for mothers and babies and with costs for society.

These risks, to be sure, are very real. Since women carrying multiples are more likely to birth prematurely, their babies are “more likely they are to be impaired, mentally, physically or both” (par. 8). Moreover, numbers from the Center for Health Statistics indicate that multiples were more likely to die within the first year of birth than single babies (par. 9). Aside from these health risks, couples with multiples face great financial burdens. Along with the trouble of suddenly having to provide for seven new children, the McCaugheys were expected to receive a one million dollar hospital bill due to the care both Bobbi and the septuplets would have to receive (par. 7).

Although these dangers and complications may have been real, neither of the November 10 articles concerning the McCaugheys can be called “news,” in the sense that neither of these stories contains genuinely new information. The news article written by Debbie Howlett functions primarily to keep the McCaughey story afloat in the news media. Nothing of real interest had happened to the McCaugheys at this point, but since the previous article had appeared eleven days prior, it was of some necessity to remind readers that Bobbi was indeed still pregnant with septuplets and still waiting to give birth. But also, this story briefly inserts a level of danger in the septuplets narrative, which the feature article written by Kim Painter more fully explores. In turn, the Painter article meticulously examines all the risks involved in multiple births, ranging from the
economic burden that multiple childbirths place on families to the potential that one or more children might not survive birth, since multiples are often born prematurely.

The next article in the series appears on November 13, 1997. Titled, “Patient Iowa Community Awaiting a Special Delivery,” this article paints Carlisle, Iowa, as a quaint, bucolic Midwest town that has been invaded by the mass media covering the story. While interviews with local townsfolk comprise a majority of this piece, the article nonetheless builds off speculation raised in the previous articles concerning Bobbi’s condition as well as the health of the septuplets. The reporter notes:

After the births, each of the babies will be placed in isolettes, tiny individual intensive care units that look like portable cribs. A team of 40 doctors is preparing for any problems, such as underdeveloped hearts and lungs. Bobbi’s condition is a major concern. “The problem is that there's just a certain amount of volume the uterus can carry,” says Marie McCormick, a pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital. (par. 15 – 16)

Although many of the interviewees in this piece simply express hope and concern for the family, statements such as these once again fuse an element of tension, danger, and excitement in the McCaughey’s story.

The climax of the septuplets narrative appeared in the November 20, 1997, edition of USA TODAY, one day after Bobbi McCaughey successfully gave birth, with a front-page article. The babies were all born roughly two months premature, which was not unexpected. The article states initially, “The doctors said their [the septuplets] chances for survival were good” (par. 4). But once again, the focus of the article shifts to the potential complications that might arise. The article notes:
The babies face potentially serious medical complications over the next two days. Respiratory problems are the most common complication. In addition to their delicate lungs, the babies' bowels and livers are not developed enough to absorb food efficiently. Doctors also will watch closely for intraventricular hemorrhage, or bleeding on the brain, that could impair development. In serious cases, a clot could kill an infant. (“Mom’s” par. 21–2)

The article closes by noting that while Bobbi could have opted to abort some of the fetuses so as to increase the remaining children’s odds of survival, she decided not to do so for “religious reasons.” “God gave us those kids,” Bobbi told reporters a month prior to giving birth, “He wants us to raise them” (par. 35).

Finally, a day after USA TODAY reported news of the septuplets’ birth, the story reached its happy conclusion with a front page article titled, “Seven Babies Are Doing Fine; ‘Wow,’ Says Dad.” Straying from prior articles, which were primarily concerned with potential health risks the children might suffer, this article opens with a positive lead. “One day after the birth of the McCaughey septuplets,” writes reporter Scott Hildebrand, “doctors astonished at their good health, said they expected the babies to survive and thrive” (par. 1). Although the reporter notes that the children were still on ventilators and listed in serious condition at a children’s hospital in Des Moines, he nonetheless emphasizes that the birth is a success, quoting a specialist who states that doctors had “extremely high expectations” concerning the newborns (par. 7). As for the Bobbi, Kenny McCaughey marvels at his wife for having persevered through the pregnancy, saying, “God's really blessed her, and the human body can do a great many things,” (par. 4).
Consider then, how these six different stories, written for USA TODAY by four different reporters, all work together to craft a unified narrative about the McCaughey septuplets. The first article does little more than inform the readers about the septuplets, while introducing the two major characters in the story, Bobbi and Kenny McCaughey. The second and third articles, which appear on the same day, insert conflict into the lives of the characters, saying that birth is imminent and the lives of the septuplets are in jeopardy. The fourth article shows that the town of Carlisle is behind the couple, hoping that the birth is successful and the septuplets are born healthy. The fifth article functions as the climax, reporting on the “miracle” birth in which all seven septuplets survived, but also noting that the children still face certain health risks. Finally, the sixth article works as a denouement, releasing dramatic tension heightened before and during the climax by assuring the audience that the septuplets are healthy and expected to “thrive.”

Certainly, all of these occurrences and facts concerning the septuplet’s health were all very real. However, while USA TODAY was neither overly sensational nor disingenuous in their reporting, their presentation of certain information had no other value than to sustain news production and create a dramatic event. Bobbi and the septuplets faced certain dangers from the moment of conception onward. But it was not until almost two weeks after the paper initially reported on Bobbi’s pregnancy that this information was presented. While reporters could use this period to conduct background research, it is also worthwhile for the paper to withhold this from the audience for a certain period of time. Simultaneously presenting information about both the extraordinary pregnancy and the dangers involved would have exhausted the story too fast. Withholding the information concerning the high probability of premature birth and
health risks for the septuplets not only allowed for news production to occur later, but it also sustained the narrative by inserting a “new” element into the tale of the McCaughey septuplets.

Moreover, since the health of the septuplets was a focal point in the story, it became necessary for reporters to address this issue in subsequent reports, even though it had been stated from the beginning that the odds were more or less in the McCaughey’s favor. The couple prays, the town hopes, and the hospital staff cross their fingers in preparation for the birth. And when the babies were finally born, headlines would label the event as a “miracle.” Although the doctors had always predicted that the children had a great chance of survival, the septuplets beat the speculative doom forecasted in prior reports.

This is not to say that the McCaughey’s pregnancy was not extraordinary. However, it is indeed the case that journalists, working in succession, managed to craft an event that moved from fear and hope to reward and redemption. Similar to a pseudo-event that relies on staging, preparation, the creation and management of information, this event, which was a story of faith, perseverance and redemption, was artfully crafted by the tailoring and arrangement of objective facts. This is not said to disparage or discredit the McCaugheys in any way— their struggle, work, and effort was and is real and honorable. Although some of their children do have slight health problems, at the time of this thesis, all are alive and well. Nor is this said to suggest that USA TODAY or their reporters are somehow disingenuous in their reporting. This is only said to suggest that news stories are not transparent, dry accounts of objective facts. Rather, for the purposes of sustaining news production and creating dramatic and entertaining stories—
both of which are of economic necessity for any news media outlet—journalists must necessarily organize information so as to form a coherent narrative that will be attractive and accessible to a mass audience.

Conclusion

Economic requirements necessitate that news media consistently produce information on a day-to-day, and in the case of some television networks, a twenty-four hour basis. Newspapers and news programs, which are as much entertainment productions as they are disseminators of information, operate on their own schedules. And while it is the extraordinary event that tends to make the best news copy, the extraordinary does not always occur. Even when the extraordinary does occur, as in the case of the McCaughey septuplets, it is often necessary to milk it for all it is worth, draining as much possible text from a single happening as is possible. Furthermore, it is always valuable for the news media to build an enthralling and coherent narrative from the event, so as to make an interesting and understandable story for the mass audience. A tale of hope, terror, perseverance, risk and miracle—published as a series of articles over a period of days—is even more captivating than one story, written after-the-fact, about a woman giving birth to septuplets. So it is never the case that any news outlet, USA TODAY or otherwise, simply reports bare facts for the purpose of informing a public that already demands to be informed. On its own, information is not a commodity; rather, information must be sculpted into something worthy of public desire and fit for consumption.
CHANNELLING A DEBATE THROUGH MICHAEL FAY: HOW A SMALL STORY CAN GENERATE A HUGE CONTROVERSY

To the news media, telling an entertaining story is of equal value to telling an accurate and informative one. To be dull is to be unread. To be unread is to lose circulation numbers and advertising dollars. To lose circulation and advertising is to go bankrupt. That stories must therefore be entertaining rather than, say, subtle, thoughtful, and complex, does not have entirely negative consequences. Critics ranging from Boorstin and Postman to Chomsky and Bagdikan are all too quick to give a somewhat one-sided description of the news, criticizing mainstream, popular news media as offering nothing more than an unsophisticated and cursory examination of complex subjects so as to appeal to the lowest common denominator. On the other hand, cultural studies scholar John Fiske argues that the value of such a medium lies in its accessibility to reach a broad range of consumers. He writes:

The more valid criticism of television news is that it is not popular enough.

Far from wishing to improve its objectivity, its depth, its authority, I would wish to increase its openness, its contradictions, the multiplicity of voices and points of view. Television news is already like a soap opera, but it needs to extend these similarities, if it is to engage its topics relevantly and importantly with the everyday lives of the people. (197)

News that fails to engage the reader will go unwatched, unread, and unnoticed according to Fiske. It is thus better for the news to present stories in a simplistic, entertaining and melodramatic fashion than it is for the news to present information in a complex and
analytical manner, which tends to bore the average reader. More people will at least be willing to read the “popular” news over the “serious” news.

Another valuable quality of the popular news, according to Fiske, is its openness to varying interpretations of world events. The news must “invite participatory readings and lay itself open to viewer-selected, viewer-produced, viewer-circulated meanings of its content,” Fiske writes, “for only this viewer productivity can make those events part of the micro-level of everyday culture” (196). The news must therefore make seemingly far-off and distant events appear to have significant consequence to the lives of audience members. Moreover, the news should turn distant world events into a participatory experience for the audience, by inviting the audience to take sides over the examined event. This is exactly how the news media handled one such incident involving a young man by the name of Michael Fay, a young American man convicted of vandalism in Singapore and sentenced to receive a caning as punishment. As with the story of the McCaughey septuplets, the Fay case made good news copy, not only because his punishment was out-of-the-ordinary in the minds of many Americans, but also because his story contained the requisite level of drama suitable for entertaining the news audience for an extended period of time.

Again, using USA TODAY articles as the primary texts, this chapter will show how news media helped build drama in the Fay story by focusing on the debates over the merits and downfalls corporal punishment that emerged as a result of Fay’s case. Like the spectacles of punishment studied by Michel Foucault and E. P. Thompson, Fay’s punishment turned his body into a symbolic site that represented to onlookers how governments should or should not treat their criminals and/or citizens. In the case of
Michael Fay, news media reports always linked his body to the debate over corporal punishment as a disciplinary technique, thereby turning Fay himself into a symbol for this conflict. If such a thing could be measured, Fay’s story was therefore even more exciting for the news audience than the previously examined septuplets story, because the Fay narrative had a participatory element—the audience could actually take sides over whether or not they agreed with the way his body was being treated. For some, the way his body was treated symbolized the way all young criminals should be treated, for others, Fay represented the downfalls of a justice system that levied overly harsh punishments for minor offences. Whatever side audience members took, after weeks of media attention, Michael Fay would forever signify this conflict.

The Michael Fay Story

Michael Fay was 18 years old and had lived in Singapore with his mother and stepfather for two years before making headlines in March of 1994. Fay pleaded guilty to a vandalism spree in which he and several other foreign students spray painted, as well as threw eggs, bricks and flowerpots at nearly twenty cars (Stone par. 2). Singapore police also found stolen flags and street signs in Fay’s residence. Fay later said that he had been coerced into confessing to the crimes (Leavitt par. 3 – 4). In any case, Fay was sentenced to four months in jail, given a $2,230 fine, and ordered six lashes with a wet rattan, to be delivered by a martial artist. After President Clinton and U.S. officials made appeals to Singapore to drop the caning sentence, Fay’s sentence was lessened to four lashes. Nevertheless, after several months of appeals and news stories building up to the punishment, Fay received the caning on May 5 of 1994.
Like the McCaughey septuplets story discussed in the previous chapter, many of the articles covering the Michael Fay story had no other function than to continue news production, especially in the absence of genuinely new information to report. In early March of 1994, Fay was sentenced to receive six strokes with a cane. Singapore officials reduced the sentence from six strokes to four on May 4, 1994. On May 5, Fay was finally caned. Yet throughout this period, *USA TODAY* managed to produce over a dozen articles—including straight news, feature, and opinion pieces—concerning Michael Fay. While his punishment was indeed severe by American standards, there is no apparent reason as to why *USA TODAY* (or, to be fair, any other media outlet) should have given the Fay story the attention it did, in lieu of covering other events.

Still, the necessity of news production required journalists to report on the Fay story whether or not anything of genuine importance had occurred. Once having placed Fay into news discourse, news outlets were not free to simply drop the story. Headlines such as “Ohio Teen May Face Fewer Cane Strokes” worked to maintain audience interest in the Michael Fay story, informing the audience of upcoming “events” that had not yet happened, and would possibly never come to fruition. Most articles however, consisted purely of the debate over Fay’s punishment. Those opposing the punishment would contend that beating criminals for relatively minor crimes was a cruel, barbaric penalty that should be condemned and abolished. Supporters claimed that such punishments were effective deterrents to crime, and that Americans would do well to adopt such policies. After he had been sentenced, Fay simply awaited his punishment while supporters and opponents of the flogging battled with one another through the news media. Much of the controversy over the Fay case, however, was generated by the news
media itself. Outlets such as *USA TODAY* needed to focus on, and perhaps even embellish the debate over Fay’s body in order to craft an interesting narrative—one that was more compelling than a story about a nickel-and-dime hoodlum receiving a punishment that was not uncommon in Singapore. Therefore, articles could not simply give a straightforward account of the Michael Fay case, but had craft the event as a story of “controversy” in order to engage reader interest.

To better understand how news stories work in such a fashion, it is helpful to look at the narrative structures of several articles, focusing primarily on the movements in each story that shift the narrative from one point to the next. The first available article concerning Michael Fay appeared in the March 10, 1994 edition of *USA TODAY* titled “Whipping Penalty Judged Too Harsh—By Some,” written by Andrea Stone. This article follows the basic framework that many subsequent articles would follow, setting up the terms of the debate over the Michael Fay caning. Table 1.1 (page 48) shows each narrative movement in this article. Beside each labeled narrative movement is the direct quote (or paraphrase thereof) that the author uses to make the transition between ideas.

The first paragraph or “lead” provides an initial frame for the reader. Apart from drawing the reader into the story, the lead gives clues to the reader about how to interpret the information that follows. Without the frame, one might wonder why a story about a young man convicted of vandalism should receive any attention whatsoever within a major newspaper. The frame tells the reader that this particular young man is different than the ordinary local hoodlum, who walks in and out of the juvenile detention facility as if it were a recreation center. Rather, this young man is so important that he has the
### Table 1.1: Narrative Movement Statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Movement</th>
<th>Statement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Frame</strong></td>
<td>“An Ohio teen-ager sentenced in Singapore to six lashes for vandalism may have President Clinton's backing but some Americans think the young man should just take his licks.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1st par.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td>“Michael Fay, 18, pleaded guilty to a 10-day spree . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2nd and 3rd par.)</td>
<td>“. . . Fay was sentenced to . . . six lashes with a wet rattan cane . . . caning breaks the skin and leaves permanent scars on the buttocks.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Point</strong></td>
<td>“The U.S. State Department Wednesday called the punishment too severe.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4th par.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Counterpoint</strong></td>
<td>“But a call-in survey . . . found 53% favor whipping and other harsh sentences as an acceptable deterrent to crime in the USA.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5th par.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Point</strong></td>
<td>“But Fay's lawyer . . . says these were ‘childhood pranks’ that are usually punished by severe scolding.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11th par.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closing Statement</strong></td>
<td>“As for Singapore, it remains unapologetic—perhaps even a little smug—about its laws.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19th par.)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

While the initial frame invites the reader to think of the Michael Fay case as a controversy, basic information regarding Michael Fay and his actions appears much earlier in this article than in subsequent articles. Although taking up a majority of article space, the debate over corporal punishment appears later in this article than in latter articles. Note also that the closing statement leaves the story as an open narrative.
The next two paragraphs give a fairly dry rendition of the objective facts in the case. Here, the reader learns about the charges leveled against Fay. Stone gives a full description of the charges, saying that Fay pleaded guilty to “a 10-day spree in which he and other foreign students spray-painted and threw eggs, bricks and flower pots at 18 cars,” also noting that “Police say they found stolen Singaporean flags and street signs in Fay’s home” (par. 2). Readers are then told about the sentencing, which included “four months in prison, a $2,230 fine and six lashes with a wet rattan cane” (par. 3). This is the only place in the article that mentions the jail time or monetary fine. The author thus presumes that the caning punishment, which is indeed an unfamiliar practice to many American readers, is of greater importance and interest to the audience than the other penalties. Therefore, the subject of corporal punishment receives far greater treatment in this and subsequent articles.

Before going into the point/counterpoint discussion of corporal punishment, background information regarding the Fay case, as well as descriptions of the crime and the punishment, help set up the terms of the debate for the reader. On the one hand, Fay pleaded guilty to a number of offences, which although being fairly minor crimes, were criminal acts nevertheless, and therefore would have to be punished. On the other hand, the punishment that Fay would receive as retribution would be fairly painful and perhaps excessive. Readers learn that “an official trained in martial arts” will deliver the caning, and that the technique often results in permanent scarring for the recipient (par. 3).

Following this is the point/counterpoint discussion of the Michael Fay case. Both the U.S. State Department and President Bill Clinton are reported to be against the caning, while President Clinton is quoted as saying “This punishment is extreme and we hope
very much . . . it will be reconsidered” (par. 4). The next paragraph then presents the counterpoint discussion, noting that some Americans support the caning punishment. Included amongst the supporters are Singapore’s then First Secretary Chin Hock Seng, quoted as saying, “We’ve received a significant number of calls expressing support . . . People are saying . . . ‘The U.S. should have implemented such a system long ago’” (par. 8). Likewise, USA TODAY quotes Max Jennings, an editor at the Dayton Daily News from Fay’s hometown of Dayton, Ohio, who notes that many callers to the paper were sympathetic to Singapore. “Some said if we treated vandals in this country as they do in Singapore, maybe we wouldn't have so many problems,” Jennings told USA TODAY (par. 6). After this, the discussion returns to arguments against the caning. Theodore Simon, Michael Fay’s lawyer, denounces the brutality of the punishment. “If you read the description, it would make you lose your lunch,” Simon told USA TODAY (par. 12). Moreover, Simon notes that caning “violates the United Nations charter and customary international law” (par. 11). Also, George Fay, Michael Fay’s father, raises doubts as to whether or not his son had actually committed the crime, saying that he may have been coerced into confessing by Singapore police (par. 16).

Overall, a good majority of this article consists purely of discussion over the punishment itself. The article is not a dry rendition of the purely factual elements of the case. Rather it is a debate between two opposing sides. This is not to say that this piece and subsequent articles do not contain objective facts, but does suggest that facts are arranged such that they present different sides to the story, creating two different lines of argument that inevitably clash with one another. To be certain, this kind of article, one that gives equal treatment to both sides of a debate, is one of the hallmarks of
professional, objective journalism. But also, adherence to an objective style does not preclude this article and others from generating audience interest, excitement, and controversy over the Michael Fay story.

Consider, for example, the end of the Stone article, which closes with a statement from the Singapore government defending the decision to cane Michael Fay. Stone cites a portion of a government document that declares, “It is because of our tough laws against anti-social crimes . . . that we do not have a situation like, say New York, where even police cars are not spared by vandals” (par. 19). While it is indeed true that Singapore stood rather unrepentantly behind their decision, the placement of this information at the very end of the article serves a storytelling function. Since Singapore remained “a little smug” and “unapologetic” about its punishment, the audience was left to wonder what would be the next move of Fay, his family, and/or the United States. Thus, the placement of this quote at the end of the article leaves the narrative open, while also giving a starting point from which the next article can begin. Likewise, the open narrative works to maintain the audience’s suspense and perhaps enhance their desire to read the next article whenever it would appear.

However, there was very little new to report for quite awhile in the Fay case. Nonetheless, this was no problem for USA TODAY, which by placing the narrative emphasis on the controversy over caning, could produce articles that simply referred to the debate itself, rather than focusing on Fay’s actual circumstances. Table 1.2 (page 52) outlines an article by reporter Carol Castaneda titled, “Not All Urging Mercy For Teen Facing Flogging,” published on April 4, 1994. The article has a framework similar to that of the one written by Andrea Stone, with a slight difference. While the
“Not All Urging Mercy For Teen Facing Flogging”
Carol Casteneda - USA TODAY – April 4, 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Movement</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial Frame</strong></td>
<td>“Michael Fay’s father pleaded Sunday for the International Red Cross to intervene . . . But when it comes to the case of the Dayton, Ohio, man who may be flogged . . . some Americans have no sympathy . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Point</strong></td>
<td>“The punishment is ‘hardly a spanking,’ says lawyer Theodore Simon . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Counterpoint</strong></td>
<td>“Although the sentence has outraged Fay’s parents, more than 100 letters and 200 phone calls in support of the punishment have come from Americans, says Chin Hock Seng of the Singapore Embassy . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td>“The ordeal began last month when Michael Fay pleaded guilty to a 10-day spree . . .”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Closing Statement</strong></td>
<td>“Michael Fay remained in jail in Singapore, awaiting the outcome of his appeal . . .”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2: As opposed to the earlier article, the basic information regarding Fay appears much later in this article, indicating that the reporter assumed readers would more than likely possess prior knowledge of the case. Note again that the closing statement leaves an open narrative. The reader is left to wonder what will happen next in the case of Michael Fay.

Point/counterpoint discussion remains the bulk of the article, it now takes precedence over the basic facts of the Michael Fay case, which appear almost at the very end of the article. Since the Casteneda article appears almost one month after USA TODAY initially reported on the story, it may be assumed that the reader already has requisite knowledge of the case. But also, this marks a transition in the Michael Fay story in which the actual circumstances of Fay himself are secondary to the debate over corporal punishment.
As with the first article, the lead in the second article works as a frame that guides reader interpretation. Again, the Michael Fay incident is not framed as an open-and-shut incident of crime and punishment. Rather, the reader is invited to think of the event as a war between Fay and his supporters and the Singapore government and its supporters. The article launches immediately into the point/counterpoint discussion. Many of the opposing and supporting arguments mentioned in the Stone article reappear in the Casteneda article. Once again, opponents argued that caning was an overly brutal punishment, noted that the crime Fay was charged with was minor, and claimed that Fay may have been coerced into confessing (par. 3 – 6). Like before, supporters responded by contending that punishments such as caning help deter criminals and that the United States should adopt measures similar to Singapore in order to prevent crime (par. 11 – 15). Most important to recognize, however, is that the only text summarizing the basic factual elements of the story appears shortly before the end of the piece, within the seventeenth paragraph. The information presented here contains no new developments, nor does the information presented differ significantly from that presented in the Andrea Stone article. In short, not only was it the debate that carried a majority of the article, but it was the debate that became the focal point.

Overall, this article reads quite similar to the earlier one written by Andrea Stone. Both are comprised largely of a point/counterpoint discussion of the case. However, it is important to recognize the different organizational pattern of the latter article, which focuses almost solely on the controversy over Michael Fay and the opinions of the discussants while including the basic factual information only as an afterthought. It is now the controversy itself that is the real “story.” And while it is Fay who ignited the
debate, his circumstances are now more or less secondary to the debate itself. At this point, it was the controversy that moved the narrative forward, allowing news to be produced regardless of whether or not any new information has surfaced. Thus, when Singapore decided in early May to reduce Fay’s sentence from six lashes to four, which was perhaps the most significant turn in the case since it had first appeared almost two months prior, this received only a brief mention in a blurb shorter than 200 words (Leavitt and Sanchez par. 3 - 4). But by the time this article appeared, the Michael Fay story had been exhausted of its most valuable material, which consisted primarily of the back-and-forth debate over corporal punishment. Hence, when this information surfaced, the Michael Fay “story” was no longer about Michael Fay himself, but about the use of corporal punishment as a disciplinary technique.

Certainly, Michael Fay’s case was worthy of debate, particularly since the type of punishment he received—caning with a wet stick—may have seemed highly unorthodox to many American readers. Therefore, it only seems natural that the treatment of his body was able to generate such a fierce debate. However, as the Fay narrative progressed, it became increasingly apparent that his body would forever symbolize this debate over corporal punishment. In a way, this punishment bore a similarity to those spectacular punishments described by E. P. Thompson and Michel Foucault. Cultural historian E. P. Thompson documents various forms of mob violence occurring from the 17th to 19th century in both England and America that were both highly stylized and ritualistic. Similarly, Michel Foucault describes violent spectacles of torture in pre-Revolutionary France, which often drew large audiences who came to witness criminal punishment. Looking at the work of both authors, it is apparent that early spectacles of
punishment utilized the criminal body as a site of symbolism, whereby various ideas could be conveyed to a community of spectators. Before further examining the debate over Fay’s body that took place within *USA TODAY*, it is worth looking at the work of both scholars to see how the body, within such a context, can take on symbolic properties.

**The Spectacle of Punishment**

Searching for the most valuable locus of the narrative, *USA TODAY* thus found that the debate over corporal punishment proved to be the most attractive and entertaining angle to take. But it is not, of course, entirely *USA TODAY* or any other media outlet’s responsibility that Fay’s caning sparked a debate over corporal punishment. Looking at the work of E. P. Thompson and Michel Foucault, it is obvious that spectacles of punishment used the criminal body to not only deter other potential criminals, but also as a means of publicizing and reifying community norms and values. Within such punishments, the criminal body took on metaphoric properties. He was the anti-social model, the power of the king, the community’s willingness to persecute wrongdoers, the threat to stability, and so forth.

Michael Fay’s body was indeed being punished in a fashion that demonstrated the power of the Singaporean government and its ability to discipline criminals, as government officials themselves would openly acknowledge. Hence, the act of punishment held a meaning within itself, irrespective of media coverage. As the work of both Thompson and Foucault shows how the body, when placed in a spectacular context, be it the mass media or otherwise, can be used explicitly to convey complex meanings or
ideas. The modes of punishment described by Thompson and Foucault often incorporated highly ritualistic, stylized imagery, and can thus best be described as spectacles of punishment. “Spectacles,” as social sciences professor John MacAlloon observes, “give primacy to visual sensory and symbolic codes; they are things to be seen” (380). Indeed, both the mob violence studied by Thompson and public torture studied by Foucault were public affairs, as a crowd was always present to witness the criminal’s punishment. While spectators, as MacAlloon argues, are often limited in their ability to participate meaningfully in the spectacle, the spectacle nevertheless holds the power to invoke cheer, sadness, unity, fright, or any other intense feeling of emotion within the audience (382).

In *Customs in Common*, E. P. Thompson examines highly participatory, yet spectacular, instances of mob violence occurring in 18th and 19th century England directed against wife-beaters, adulterers, unpopular political figures and others. First of all, mob violence drew attention through the incorporation of extraneous elements. Rather than a simple capture and beating of the deviant, mob violence was often accompanied by “rough music”: raucous noise created by the clanging of various objects such as pots and pans, often performed in conjunction with the singing of derisive songs directed against the offender that documented his or her transgressions (468 – 9). Rough music could be performed alone as an act of correction itself, or it might be conducted in combination with acts of violence directed against a stand-in representing the offender (an actor playing the offender or an effigy) to serve as a warning (470 – 2). In all cases, rough music functioned primarily as a means of drawing notice—to the criminal and to
the crowd itself—thereby making the event a spectacle insofar as it demanded attention from the surrounding community.

Often, rough music accompanied the mob’s punishment of the offender. These punishments were often elaborate and ritualistic. In some cases, the mob would simply beat the offender after dragging him or her out of the house and through the streets (476). But other punishments might be more elaborate. For example, the offender might be made to “ride the stang.” The crowd would tie the offender to a pole, carry him or her through town, and might end the event by throwing the offender into a nearby ditch or pond (472). Quite similar to riding the stang was the “skimmington ride” in which townspeople dressed to represent the offending party would be ridden through town on the back of a live donkey or wooden horse (475). The mob then arrived at the door of the victim, perhaps dragging him or her out of the house for a thrashing, all the while accompanied by rough music that proclaimed the offences and directed ridicule against the wrongdoer (475 – 6). These highly public demonstrations had the normative effect of publicizing offences against community values by directing unwanted attention towards offending parties, simultaneously intimidating the victim while serving as a warning to onlookers against enacting similar violations (478, 487).

Like the spectacle, mob violence and rough music embraced seemingly contradictory elements. Some forms of rough music were used on occasion for celebratory purposes. For instance, young men might have sung humorous songs outside the house of a young couple on their wedding night, creating a discordant but nevertheless good-spirited noise to commemorate the rite of marriage (484). This reveals
the somewhat paradoxical nature of rough music as a form that can either be used to express festive merriment or public disgraces. As Thompson writes:

   Rough music is a vocabulary which brushes the carnival at one extreme and the gallows at the other; which is about crossing forbidden frontiers or mixing alien categories; which traffics in transvestism and inversion; whose flaring bonfires may recall heretics or even hell whose horned master brings to mind the cuckold who is mocked. (509)

Rough music, along with mob violence, were both complicated forms of expression, but nevertheless explicable when viewed as a spectacular or at least quasi-spectacular affair. It is arguably more comfortable to construct a dichotomy to describe the varied uses of rough music. At the one end, excitement, celebration and festival. At the other, terror, brutality, and punishment. But just as the spectacle articulates happiness and fear, mob violence along with rough music combines enjoyment and violence. Rough music contained this power to express desire and emotion, whether a joyous celebration of a young married couple or the contemptuous thrashing of a wife-beater. As a form of expression that occurred publicly and seemingly expressed the wishes of the vigilante mob, rough music contained symbolic power which, as described by anthropologist Victor Turner, is the power to “elicit emotion and express and mobilize desire” and makes normative values appear as desired modes of behavior (528). If the community deemed certain members as undesirable transgressors that threatened the prevailing social order, then that community would work to suppress these actions when they occurred, regardless of whether or not the community acted out of reasonable self-defense or pure maliciousness. Violence may have been unpleasant, but it was also the most obvious and
direct means of suppressing transgression. Incorporating theatrical elements—funny songs, clamorous noise, effigies and costumes—served to create an atmosphere of excitement and pleasure around violent repression and public suffering. Perhaps this lessened the illness felt by the executors of violence, if they felt these effects. More likely, rough music told the victim that the community delighted and desired his torment, while reminding the community that his torment was something to be delighted and desired.

Thus, the beating of Michael Fay became a means for some to express their approval of such harsh disciplinary measures. As will be discussed in the next section, some commentators both outside and within the news media saw Fay’s beating as “the way things should be” when it came to matters of criminal justice. According to such persons, the American crime problem would be solved if the justice system simply beat young offenders who committed misdemeanors, deterring them from committing greater crimes.

Still, while rough music and various forms of mob violence work to instill normative values, it is difficult to categorize these actions as completely spectacular, since the boundary between performers and spectators is not distinct. A far more lucid example of spectacular violence comes from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, which describes an atmosphere of festivity surrounding public torture in pre-Revolutionary France. “[F]rom the point of view of the law that imposes it,” Foucault writes, “public execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph” (34). In this sense, public torture and execution was often excessive, with the executioner(s) taking long lengths of time to exact measured pain against the criminal. Foucault’s famous
example concerns the torture and execution of Damiens the regicide, whom the
executioners burnt with hot sulfur, tore flesh from his leg, arm, and chest with pinchers,
had drawn and quartered, and finally, burned at the stake after having cut off all of his
limbs (3 – 5). All this took place in public, in front of a crowd for all to see.

Although conducted as a punishment for certain crimes, public torture was
certainly different from rough music, skimmington rides and the like because it comes
from a different source; Thompson describes bottom-up, popular emissions of violence,
Foucault describes violence that comes from the top-down. Only the sovereign king
could authorize public execution and torture. Every criminal was a “potential regicide”
according to Foucault, because their crimes threatened the power of the sovereign by
transgressing his laws (53 – 4). To mitigate the threat the criminal posed against the
ability of the sovereign to rule his people effectively, vengeance against the criminal
reminded citizens where the power lies and what might happen should any citizen
challenge this power. “We must regard the public execution,” Foucault writes, “as a
political operation. It was logically inscribed, in a system of punishment in which the
sovereign . . . decided and carried out punishments, in so far as it was he who, through
the law, had been injured by the crime” (53). Thus, corporal punishment was a site
where the king’s power manifests to counteract the threatening effects of criminal action.
“Its [torture’s] aim is not so much to re-establish a balance as to bring into play . . . the
dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful
sovereign who displays his strength,” Foucault writes (49). In other words, punishment
did not serve to correct criminal behavior or redress damage caused by criminal actions.
Rather, torture attested to the king’s power over his citizenry.
Punishments therefore made use of the criminal’s body in order to make the public aware of the sovereign’s limitless power. Torture in pre-Revolutionary France was therefore a lengthy, ritualistic process containing elaborate stylistic and symbolic elements. For example, criminals might be punished at the same location where they had committed the crime, in order to reconnect the criminal to the transgressive action (44). Furthermore, parts of the punishment itself might mimic the original crime (45). Both the recreation of locale and the criminal act itself served to remind the spectators about the wickedness of the criminal, or in Foucault’s words, “reveal the truth” of the crime (44). In all cases, the punishments did more than simply inflict pain. To be sure, torture might be utilized in private for the simple purpose of achieving a confession about the crime from the criminal, thus strengthening the evidence against him or her (37 – 8). When made public however, torture took on a very different purpose. Torture utilizes acts of symbolic violence that refer simultaneously to both the original crime and the sovereign’s power to enact that very crime upon the body of the criminal who opposes him.

Again, the public is meant to do little more than watch criminal’s torture. Few play a direct role in torture and punishment: those who have authority. Spectators, the rabble of obeying citizens, should at least watch the punishment, and at most, celebrate it. The spectacle, whether celebratory or horrific, is an event that begs attendance due purely to its grandiosity that inspires wonderment in onlookers. In all cases, the spectacle requires spectators in order to exist. As Foucault notes, “the main character was the people,” whose attendance was necessary for the public execution to exist (57). And, in its symbiotic relationship with the crowd, the spectacle delivers awe and trepidation in return for the presence of spectators. “Hence the insatiable curiosity that drove the
spectators to the scaffold to witness the spectacle of sufferings truly endured,” Foucault writes, “there one could decipher crime and innocence, the past and the future, the here below and the eternal” (46).

The crowd was ultimately meant to sympathize with the sovereign (Foucault 59). If punishments were too extreme however, the crowd might turn against the sovereign. In these cases, the body of the criminal would not only symbolize the power of the sovereign, but would also symbolize the sovereign’s willingness to use this power in an unjust and unfair manner against his own citizenry. Like the spectators who watched their torment, most victims of public torture and execution were commoners; thus the crowd often sympathized with the condemned rather than the sovereign (63). Thus, should the crowd feel the punishment was too severe for the crime, they might express indignation or worse against the soldiers, guards, and executioners carrying out the sentence (62 – 3). Consider here the commentators who would use Fay’s beating as an argument against corporal punishment. Some used the beating as evidence that Singapore was a barbaric, backwards, and brutal nation, whose low crime rates stemmed from the use of police state tactics.

There are certainly differences in Thompson and Foucault’s research. Thompson sees mob violence as a product of the people, whereas Foucault argues the king could only authorize public torture. Nonetheless, a commonality between public torture and mob violence is the method in which violence is employed against the condemned. In both cases, violence contains ritualistic elements—the routine use of similar symbolic gestures (the use of the original murder weapon; rough music mocking the accused; etc.). More importantly, many of these actions bear little weight on the actual physical violence
occurring in either case. Rough music does not enhance the physical pain of a public beating. Neither does the grandiose display of effigies or actors portraying the victim augment bodily harm in any way.

Nonetheless, both Thompson and Foucault show that it was not the function of the public punishment to simply penalize the criminal. Rather, public punishments made spectacles of criminal bodies in an effort to communicate something to a larger audience. Within this spectacular context, the body could be forced to symbolize something larger than the punishment itself. First, the spectacle worked to define the offender’s body as being “criminal.” Spectators were thus obliged to consider that person’s body as being that of an “offender” before being a specific individual. From here, the criminal’s body could then be used to symbolize a number of elements: the crime that had been committed; the willingness of the community to prosecute the offender; the power of the sovereign; the cruelty of the sovereign; and so forth. In any case, within the spectacle, the body could be forced to signify an innumerable amount of meanings.

Michael Fay’s punishment, although commonplace in Singapore, was indeed extraordinary to an American audience, and was therefore grounds for scrutiny by the American media. And while there was no visual documentation of Fay’s caning, the event was no less public, stylized or dramatic. In reporting on his story, USA TODAY and other news media outlets thrust Fay into the public domain. But in this instance, Fay’s punishment differed from earlier spectacles of violence in that the media worked to do most of the dramatic staging for the event through emphasizing Fay’s body as a site of debate. This was done through the production of stories during the weeks leading up to the caning; stories which, as noted previously, were often produced even during periods
when nothing of real concern had developed in Fay’s story. But, in the interests of news production, it was necessary make interesting stories about Fay no matter what was happening. And since very little had changed in the life of Michael Fay during the weeks leading up to his caning, the most worthwhile reporting angle to take was one that focused almost purely on symbolism. Like the adulterer who was made to ride the stang so as to serve as an example to other adulterers, or the murderer whose torture would demonstrate the power of the king, Fay would become, in the eyes of the media, the petty criminal who stood in as an example of other criminals, and his treatment would represent how their bodies should or should not be treated.

Michael Fay as Metaphor

If Michael Fay had committed wanton acts of vandalism in Smalltown, U.S.A., he might have been punished with a small fine, several hours of community service, and a strong admonishment from the sentencing judge. His crime would be posted somewhere in the police reports section of the newspaper, alongside real estate transactions and traffic violations. Fay would be no different than any other juvenile delinquent. His actions would more than likely be viewed as just another unfortunate byproduct of the formative years, in which some young adult males, for whatever reason, engage in acts of malicious mischief and petty vandalism with other delinquent males, ensuring proper maintenance and propagation of the vast idiot bond that connects so many boys like Fay. But Fay’s circumstances were more extraordinary than those of the common vandal. So he crawled out of the local police reports and into national headlines, achieving fame far beyond that of the ordinary delinquent.
Through media attention, the Michael Fay incident quickly became a modern-day version of the public punishment spectacle. But while the meanings that came from the criminal bodies on the old French scaffold were produced through the physical actions of torture used against the body itself, the meanings found in Fay’s body were produced almost solely through media text about the punishment rather than the punishment itself. In the case of early punishment spectacles, there was little else for the audience to interpret other than what was being witnessed by the senses in the immediate context. In the case of Michael Fay, the audience did not have the opportunity to witness his punishment firsthand. Instead, most audience knowledge came through media reports, which were not transparent accounts of the event. Rather, journalistic reports emphasized and perhaps embellished the dramatic elements of Fay’s experience. And, as noted previously, most of the drama in the story came from the debates over how Fay’s body was being treated. Most articles read like tennis matches, where Fay’s father and lawyer, U. S. officials, and spokespersons for human rights organizations would speak out against the caning, while Singaporean officials and American supporters of corporal punishment promoted Fay’s caning in return. In this sense, while the audience may not have immediately witnessed Fay’s punishment, his body nevertheless contained the same metaphoric power as the deviant who was tortured publicly centuries ago. His body for some would represent the way criminals should be treated by governments, and for others, the way governments should never treat their peoples.

Consider, for example, how supporters of corporal punishment, in arguing for Fay’s caning, essentially viewed Michael Fay as the embodiment of the more abstract concept of “criminality.” In a column titled “Bring Back the Birch,” writer Heather Stern
Little argued that if corporal punishment were utilized in the United States as it is in Singapore, this would have a deterrent effect, and effectively reduce the crime rate. “Misdeeds must be met with clear authority and punishment befitting the crime,” she writes, “And they must be met head-on, not merely deflected to become the problems of tomorrow's generation” (par. 6). The idea that corporal punishment and/or the death penalty has any kind of effect on the crime rate has long been debated by sociologists and criminologists. However, this is not of concern here. What is more interesting is how the author utilizes the very singular incident of Michael Fay committing vandalism as a means to support corporal punishment. Rather than debating whether or not the caning penalty is too excessive a punishment for the specific crime Fay committed, Little simply equates Fay with the more abstract “criminal,” then argues that his treatment is the way all criminals should be treated. She writes:

The message is clear: Our criminal justice system has little, if any, deterrent effect. The first 15 minutes of TV news on Easter Sunday showed no less than a half-dozen violent crimes against innocent victims. Many offenders commit heinous acts while awaiting trial or out on parole. More and more young people are found guilty of crimes against person and property, yet scarcely are slapped on the wrists. Their older counterparts routinely exit the revolving door of justice, marking months in jail as notches on their belts of bravado. (par. 3)

Fay had not been convicted of any violent crime, nor is it apparent that the young Michael Fay had all the makings of a haggard jailbird who, as an adult, would brag about his jail time to fellow inmates. Nonetheless, the author suggests that if more petty
criminals like Fay were punished in such a fashion, this would deter other criminals from committing similar crimes, and perhaps steer young hoodlums away from committing more serious offenses. Viewing Fay as the embodiment of the criminal element in general, the author supports the caning punishment, since it is also her argument that this is how all criminals should be punished.

Similarly, columnist Peter Gemma viewed Michael Fay and his punishment as an example of how criminals everywhere should be disciplined. Like Little, Gemma supported the caning sentence as a good method for deterring criminals. He writes:

[T]he four strokes he (Michael Fay) received across his rear end as part of his punishment have been described as harsh. That’s a difficult charge to defend, coming from a country where 24 million of us fall victim to violent crime each year—that’s 46 people each minute of every day—and where there’s been a 500% increase in crime during the past 30 years. And it’s a particularly difficult charge to pin on Singapore, whose 3 million citizens suffered just 60 murders and 80 rapes last year. (par. 1 – 3)

Fay, however, had not been convicted of a violent crime. Nevertheless, the author uses Fay as an example of how criminals in general—ranging from reckless vandals to violent murderers—should be punished.

Opponents of the caning, by contrast, focused more on the punishment technique itself, emphasizing in particular the gruesome components of caning. In stark contrast to the articles that support Fay’s caning, authors that oppose his caning do not describe Michael Fay as the embodiment of the generalized criminal element, instead see him as a young man who, in a very particular and isolated incident, made poor decisions. For
example, A *USA TODAY* editorial titled “Don’t Copy Singapore,” recognizes Fay simply as “An American student living in Singapore” who “was convicted of vandalism, criminal mischief and possessing stolen property” (par. 4). There is no attempt to construct Fay as being metaphoric of criminality in its entirety. Instead, Fay’s body holds an entirely different meaning within this particular piece. In this article, the punishment inflicted upon Fay is used to represent both the brutality of other nations’ legal systems, as well as the civility of U. S. law. The editorial makes its point by graphically describing the caning process, saying, “Bits of flesh are said to fly with each strike, along with copious amounts of blood.” (par. 5). All of this is mentioned with a larger point in mind:

> The baneful punishment for petty crime is a reminder that we are, all of us, better off here despite high crime. In the United States, you cannot easily be punished at the whim of government. You cannot be tortured. You cannot be forced to testify against yourself. (par. 8)

In short, this piece used Fay’s body as an example of the way in which governments should not treat their citizens, criminal or otherwise. Furthermore, since the article argues that Fay’s body would be treated in an unjust manner, this meant that Fay exemplified the dangers of government power run amok.

> Whatever side the authors took, it is important here to simply recognize that the Fay incident allowed commentators a means by which they could speak of more complex issues: namely, corporal punishment and its potential misuse by governments. To be sure, Fay’s story contained as much infused drama and tension as the story of the McCaughey septuplets. Continuous recycling and rehashing of the debate over Fay’s
body allowed *USA TODAY* to sustain news production without the presence of new material. However, just as Fiske argues that the soap opera-like presentation of “popular news” succeeds by connecting far-off, distant events to the “everyday lives of the people,” the dramatic presentation of the Fay narrative allowed complex, abstract subjects to be channeled through Fay’s body and distributed to a large audience.

Furthermore, by providing a simplistic metaphor for debates over corporal punishment, Fay’s name could be referenced in subsequent articles linked to corporal punishment and issues of disciplining America’s youth. For example, when Mississippi and several other states considered passing laws that would allow paddling as a punishment for certain misdemeanors, a *USA TODAY* editorial arguing against the passage of this law made a point of noting that such measures were “all reminiscent of last year’s high-profile caning of U.S. teen-ager Michael Fay in Singapore” ("Singapore" par. 5). Likewise, an article discussing whether or not spanking is an appropriate disciplinary technique for parents to use on their children begins by mentioning Fay, whose treatment elicited both “public outrage” and “applause” according to reporter Ann Oldenberg (par. 1 – 2). In the case of both articles, the name “Michael Fay” provided a quick and easy reference for more complex ideas—unruly delinquents, potential solutions to the crime problem, and so forth.

However, the downfall of using a particular dramatic instance as a symbol of underlying political, social, and cultural issues is that a metaphor, being a form of figurative language, is by definition, not literal speech. Hence, the possibilities of embellishment increase when a single event is discussed as if it were symbolic of underlying social conditions so as to produce news content. An interesting story about
one young man accused of vandalism is not necessarily indicative of a larger crime problem. Nor does his caning by a country that allows corporal punishment necessarily mean that the United States or other countries should entertain ideas of implementing such procedures to solve these crime problems.

Thus, *USA TODAY*, along with other news outlets, helped manufacture a “crisis” from the Michael Fay story that did not necessarily exist. Consider, for example, the lead from one article written about Fay by reporter Marco della Cava: “Senseless crimes continue unabated across the nation. In big cities and quiet hamlets. Tombstones toppled. Shoppers shot. Grandmothers raped” (par. 1). Not invalid assertions, to be sure, but quite strong nevertheless. A long leap, but a fairly quick step it was for the writer to shift towards a discussion about a spray-painting vandal, after describing a vermin infested, grandma-raped Babylon in the lead paragraph. Overall, the media could discuss the ups and downs of corporal punishment in such a dramatic fashion, purely because it was a quick and easy topic to cover, given that Michael Fay was already a fixture in the news, and especially given the fact that commentators viewed Michael Fay as embodying all of the burden that crime placed on society.

**Conclusion**

It could be argued that Michael Fay, whether a part of news media discourse or not, represented several cultural and political issues: the use of corporal punishment, the abuse of power by governments, the crime problem, and so on. However, the news media’s focus on the metaphoric properties of Michael Fay and his situation, while
creating good copy, exaggerated the issues Fay represented. Fay’s crimes, destructive and childish as they may have been, were by no means representative of American culture circling the drain. Nor should the caning punishment have appeared to be a viable solution to the crime problem, simply because the Michael Fay story occupied a few newspaper column inches for several weeks back in 1994. And, as excessive and cruel as the caning punishment was, it should not have necessarily indicated that the whole world over was on a backward slide towards barbarism. Yet, when the news media focuses on a singular example such as Michael Fay, these conditions had all the appearance of being real. And to a greater extent, the focus on Michael Fay made such conditions appear to be the pressing issues of the day: ones that needed immediate resolution.
NEWS PRODUCTION AND THE BODY AS A SITE OF POLITICAL CONFLICT: AN EXAMINATION OF THE TERRI SCHIAVO STORY

The speed and proliferation of modern news media has made it such that almost anyone, for most every reason imaginable, can achieve celebrity. Michael Fay, Rodney King, Lorena Bobbitt—that these names have become part of the contemporary lexicon is due not simply to the national media’s focus upon their stories, but the national media’s creation of their stories. Certainly, such individuals who enter news discourse are real people. Their crimes, struggles, traumas, and so forth are all very tangible. This, however, does not necessarily mean that any of their stories possess any intrinsic relevance to a mass audience. At first glance, most do not. Michael Fay’s caning, for example, could only really affect one person, and that was Fay himself. It thus seems silly that the news media would devote so much coverage to Fay in particular, when whatever happened to Fay would have little impact upon the lives of the news audience.

Yet, through the bodies of Michael Fay and others like him, members of the news media were able to discuss with great detail concepts that were indeed relevant to a mass audience by using these people as representative examples of more complex social, cultural, and political issues. Through the body of Bobbi McCaughey, the Iowa woman pregnant with septuplets, the news media was able to talk about the ability of modern science to enhance the odds of conception, the risks of multiple pregnancies, and so forth. Likewise, Michael Fay, within news media discourse, symbolized reckless youth, government abuse of power, and the crime problem, and his situation allowed for a debate to take place about whether or not corporal punishment was an effective or appropriate deterrent to crime. It was the bodies of these individuals—the ways they
were being treated and the states in which they existed at the time—that reified these ideas. The concepts of medical science, deviance, punishment, and so on are all fairly intangible. But because the body is real, it can stand in as a material representation of amorphous and ethereal ideas.

The news media, when manufacturing stories about persons who have no apparent significance to a mass audience, thus seeks to invest the persons about whom they report with as much symbolic weight as possible, so as to make the audience feel that stories about these persons are worthwhile and relevant, which in turn generates interest in, and consumption of, the news product. As with the examples discussed in earlier chapters, one such individual, Terri Schiavo, was the subject of intense media coverage in early 2005. Brain damaged and in a coma, Terri was at the center of a battle between her parents, Mary and Robert Schindler, who wished to continue her life support, and her husband, Michael, who did not. Like the previously discussed stories, the news media’s focus on Terri Schiavo did not involve the simple coverage of an event, but rather, the day-to-day production of information and hence, construction of the event itself. Like the case of Michael Fay, the media found that the debate between Michael Schiavo and Mary and Robert Schindler would make the best narrative center of the Terri Schiavo story. But, as the case progressed and coverage intensified, politicians and other external parties took increasing interest in the plight of Terri Schiavo, some taking the side of Michael Schiavo, others siding with the Schindlers. However, it was not simply the case that the media was covering this battle. Rather, as this chapter will argue, the news media helped facilitate this war by constructing Terri’s body as a site of political conflict. While scholars such as Michel Foucault have argued that the body exists as a political site,
whether it is part of a media text or not, it is arguable that the news media helps to augment the body’s symbolic properties by placing it in a domain where it can be interpreted, analyzed, debated, and made into a story. Outside of news media discourse, Terri Schiavo was an issue of debate between her estranged husband and parents. Within news media discourse, Terri Schiavo was much more: the embodiment of all interfamilial struggles over the death of a loved one; a warning to those who had not constructed a living will; and a personification of the meaning of “life” itself. The news media endowed her body with this much symbolic weight so as to forge a personal connection between Terri Schiavo and members of the news audience. In turn, Terri Schiavo became a worthy site of political conflict—whatever was done with or to her body would be sure to resonate in some way with the news audience, who was routinely invited to identify personally with Schiavo.

**The Body in Contemporary News Media**

Thus far, the focus has been on the news media’s role in manufacturing events through the production of information, as well as the organization of this information into coherent narrative frameworks. By publishing a series of dramatic articles that speculated upon numerous possible disastrous outcomes regarding the birth of a set of septuplets, *USA TODAY* was not only able to fill news space even during periods of lag, but also told an entertaining story of hope, perseverance, and a miracle. Likewise, although there was very little information to report concerning the Michael Fay story, *USA TODAY* was able to focus on the debates over the young man’s punishment, again filling news space when there was no new information to cover. Now, it may be argued
that the news media might have focused on any number of similar cases and been able to
craft comparable narratives. All childbirths involve some potential complications and
risks for both parent and child. Reporters might therefore have picked any random
expecting couple, interviewed their neighbors and coworkers, discussed the hazards of
childbirth, and produced an almost identical series of articles to that of the septuplets
narrative. Similarly, journalists might have found any criminal awaiting sentencing,
asked whether or not the punishment is too harsh, asked whether or not the punishment
would effectively deter other criminals, and manufactured reports analogous to the
Michael Fay story. If this is indeed the case that news media could have produced
similar narratives from persons in comparable situations, then it is also worth considering
that the persons involved in each previously examined story served as representative
examples for much deeper cultural, social, and political concerns. In this sense, the
bodies of Bobbi McCaughey and Michael Fay were each able to signify complex issues,
even though each person appeared to be engrafted in their own very particular
circumstances. It is thus worth considering how news media texts exacerbate the
symbolic properties of the body, in order to make one person stand out as a single
representative for broad social concerns.

Gender studies scholars in particular have been concerned with how culture
determines understandings of the body. Linda McDowell, for example, argues that
although certain bodily traits and body-types are often thought of as being natural,
different cultures hold different expectations as to what natural bodies should look like
and how they should behave (34). Looking primarily at gender roles, McDowell argues
that expectations regarding the bodies of men and women are largely decided by societal,
cultural, and historical circumstances rather than pre-determined natural laws (68). Up until the eighteenth century, for example, the idea that women were naturally inferior to men stemmed largely from the conception that women were simply underdeveloped males (46). Along the same line of thinking, standards of beauty for both men and women have shifted throughout time due to changes in the surrounding social, political, and economic landscapes. “Between 1400 and 1700,” write Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter, “a fat body shape was considered sexually appealing and fashionable. The ideal woman was portrayed as plump, big-breasted and maternal” (36). Towards the 1960’s and onwards however, standards of feminine beauty changed drastically. “Skinny fashion models . . . replaced shapely film stars as the dominant cultural icons,” the authors write, noting the gradual shift from voluptuous figures such as Mae West and Marilyn Monroe to waif-like models such as Twiggy and Kate Moss as the culture’s “ideal” women (37). The shift in such a standard cannot be reduced to one simple explanation. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that extra weight in one era might signify abundance and wealth, but in another, might signify sloth and laziness. Likewise, whereas a lean body may have indicated poverty or poor health centuries ago, a lean body nowadays might suggest that a person can afford to have leisure time to use for exercise.

In short, bodies and body-types always exist within larger meaning systems, which themselves are influenced by cultural expectations and material circumstances. McDowell goes so far as to argue that because the body itself can be considered a geographical location—through performing in a particular manner, the body reproduces the cultural, societal, and national identities linked to those traits. Some of her work can be traced to philosopher and historian Michel Foucault’s ideas put forth in his work, The
History of Sexuality, in which he argues that the body serves as a vehicle of power that carries out the needs of various institutions—church, education, science, government, and so forth—through sexuality. Whether in the more repressive Victorian/Judeo-Christian era or the less repressive Freudian era, in which patients were encouraged to speak freely about sex, different modes of discourse created different ways of linking sex to the body. For example, new modes of scientific discourse emerging during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed the ways in which sexual habits were categorized and classified (41). Rather than viewing sexual habits as isolated acts, science and medicine saw the sexual act itself as being inexorably intertwined with the identity of the individual (42 – 3). “As defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts,” Foucault argues (43). With scientific discourse however, the “homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.” In other words, rather than considering particular sex acts as individual sins that could be cleansed and eradicated through religious ritual, science viewed sexuality and individual identity as one in the same, which in turn allowed for better monitoring and examination of sexuality. Hospitals, schools, and psychiatric institutions could now catalogue and monitor sexual behaviors, and the body itself could be better classified into categories of “normal” and “abnormal” (46 – 7). Governments from the eighteenth century onward, Foucault argues, increasingly recognized the necessity of monitoring their citizens’ sexuality (25). He writes:

It was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizens’ sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable of
controlling the use he made of it. Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it. (26)

Rather than simply repress the sexual urges of the body, however, governments had a particular interest in making sure that citizens used sexuality in a manner conducive to the needs of the state. “We are often reminded of the countless procedures which Christianity once employed to make us detest the body,” Foucault writes, “but let us ponder all the ruses that were employed for centuries to make us love sex . . .” (159). In other words, the individual had to understand some sexual behaviors that ran contrary to the needs of the state as being deviant, whereas other sexual behaviors such as the duty of the couple to procreate, had to be understood as desirable (104 – 5). Each body, in short, had to be invested with both sexual desire and the power to use sex in a certain manner.

Foucault thus views the use of the body, whether in terms of sexuality or otherwise, as a means by which the state and other institutions can perpetuate their own needs. Hence, when McDowell argues that the body is a geographic locale, it is in part due to the idea that the body has been instilled with particular habits that have been predetermined by national, societal, and cultural conditions in which that body exists. To be sure, both Foucault and McDowell are heavily socially constructivist in their thinking, whereby there appears to be little room in either scholars’ argument for natural or essential qualities within the individual, upon which society or culture have not exerted influence or control. One must wonder the extent to which state institutions must instill sexual desire within the individual as Foucault argues, given that sexual desire most likely predates the formation of modern nation-states. Nonetheless, both Foucault and
McDowell help show how varying modes of discourse create different ways of reading and interpreting the individual body, and how the individual body can represent norms associated with different nationalities, cultures, and other groups.

Consider then, what happens when two or more different individuals or groups hold different sets of expectations regarding any one particular body. Examining the role of burial rituals in post-communist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, anthropologist Katherine Verdery argues that the bodies of long-dead political leaders were contested places that could either create conflicts or help settle long-standing disputes. For example, Imre Nagy, a Hungarian communist prime minister, was hanged in 1958 for attempting to reform socialism and buried in an unmarked grave (29). In June of 1989, Nagy was given a formal reburial in Budapest, while roughly a quarter of a million Hungarians were in attendance. The reburial ceremony, invariably meaning different things to different people, made Nagy’s body a multifaceted symbol; his body symbolized a national hero, a martyr figure, a political reformist, and a persecuted saint (31). Moreover, Nagy’s body symbolized the end old communist order and a transition into a new era.

Similarly, the corpse of V. I. Lenin took on symbolic meaning after the fall of Soviet communism. Prime minister Boris Yeltsin, not the first to have proposed the idea, suggested in both 1993 and later in 1997 that Lenin’s corpse be removed from the Red Square mausoleum and reburied (44). Verdery notes that Russian Orthodox theology demands that “every dead person should be interred” but also insists that “dead people whose bodies have not decayed are holy” (45). Since Lenin was considered by many to be a “saintly” figure, the idea of a reburial stirred controversy among the Russian
Orthodox Church leadership, government officials, and the general populace—to bury Lenin was “proper,” but could destroy his saintly status; to leave him unburied was “improper,” but ensured that he remained a saint (44 – 6). Furthermore, Verdery remarks that the Orthodox Church “refrained from stating whether the church would bury him as ‘Christian,’” which surely threatened to pose another conflict (44).

In the above cases, the reburial ceremony was a way in which the body could be used to put old regimes to rest and, in the case of Imre Nagy, perhaps establish national unity. By contrast, the very mention of reburying V.I. Lenin polarized the populace, since different groups held different interpretations over the meaning of Lenin’s corpse and what its reburial would signify. In all cases, the dead body provided a sight of political, cultural, and religious meaning—all of which could manifest publicly during the burial ritual. Verdery writes:

Bones and corpses, coffins and cremation urns, are material objects . . . As such, the body’s materiality can be critical to its symbolic efficacy: unlike notions such as “patriotism” or “civil society,” for instance, a corpse can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places. Bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making the past immediately present. (27)

In short, the corpse was often used symbolically in the post-communist Soviet Union to embody rather abstract concepts and ideas. As such, a burial ritual could use the corpse as a means of communicating certain messages to the public. So, when Joseph Stalin’s body was moved from Red Square and “buried . . . in a far corner of the Kremlin wall” in
1961, this provided a symbolic way for the Communist Party to bury the past, and mark the beginning of a new future (2).

Just as death places the body in a fixed state, such that it can be more readily used for symbolic purposes, modern communication technologies allow bodies to become frozen textually, such that they can be read carefully, examined thoroughly, and made into a symbol. One such example includes the videotaped beating of Rodney King, which made national news in early 1991. On March 3, 1991, King, an African American, was pulled over by the Los Angeles police for an alleged speeding violation. George Holliday, using a recently purchased video camera, recorded an eighty-one second video of four police officers—Ted Briseno, Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, and Timothy Wind—kicking, stunning, and beating King with their batons (Baker 42 – 3). The defense used this video, which depicted Rodney King being struck by the officers and in an obvious state of immobility, as evidence that he was nevertheless a threat to the four officers.

The defense tried to frame King as being enough of a danger to warrant fifty-six baton hits from the officers (Baker 42). Robert Gooding-Williams argues that the defense’s rhetorical strategy relied on stereotypical, racist assumptions regarding the black body. “Characterizations of black bodies often represent their actions and/or attributes as consequences of discrimination, social pathology, state policy, unemployment, jungle chaos . . . or some other cause or causes,” he writes (158). The defense, he argues, utilized such assumptions by repeatedly likening King to a savage and a wild beast. The attorneys “elicited testimony from King’s assailants that depicted King as a bear, and as emitting bearlike groans” (166). The defense compared King’s body to
that of a “‘wounded’ animal,” which rhetorically positioned the police in a superior position. The police, beating Rodney King, were merely “holding the fort of civilization against the willful attack of the chaos-bearing wild animal.” Gooding-Williams thus argues that the defense, by conducting a very close reading of his body as it was being beaten on videotape, presented King’s body not only as a threat, but an external threat coming from outside the boundaries of civilization. Likewise, Judith Butler argues that the defense’s argument relied upon “white paranoia” of a danger from the black community, and used King’s body to symbolize this threat. She writes:

The video was used as ‘evidence’ to support the claim that the frozen black male body on the ground receiving blows was himself producing those blows, about to produce them, was himself the imminent threat of a blow and, therefore, was himself responsible for the blows he received. (18 – 19)

The defense’s justification then, was that Rodney King, no matter how submissive he may have appeared to be, presented a viable threat to the officers.

The four officers were acquitted on April 29, 1992. Many, of course, disagreed with the assertions made by the defense, which claimed that the officers were in danger from being attacked by King. And, since mass communication had allowed the videotaped beating of Rodney King to proliferate and become a public document, the national audience could also watch the video, and decide for themselves if the defense’s interpretation of King’s body was correct. Needless to say, the same video that the defense used in their argument that King was a “threat,” others interpreted as evidence that King was a defenseless victim of police brutality. Thus, the acquittal of the officers became a catalyst for the South Central Los Angeles riots that took place shortly after the
verdict. Certainly, there were other causal factors involved in the riots. Research by Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell indicates several possible precipitating factors including similar instances of police brutality in the region that occurring in the previous two decades; a decline in “well-paying and stable jobs” in South Central Los Angeles; the “defunding” of community-based organizations; and a decline in the quality of education in Los Angeles schools (121 – 122, 126 – 127). Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore the presence of the video, and its distribution by news media, as one of the key precipitating agents of the Los Angeles riots. The Rodney King story provides an excellent example of how the mass media creates a national platform upon which persons can stand, and can be scrutinized, examined, and turned into symbols that represent deeper cultural and social concerns, depending on the interpretations of the watching news audience. And, as in the case of Rodney King, if interpretations of the body differ, the consequences can be severe.

Consider now, what happened in the case of Michael Fay. Fay himself, as discussed in the previous chapter, possessed several different identities. He was an American, a teenager, and a criminal. Just as the bodies of former Soviet leaders provided ways of rehashing or settling old disputes, Fay’s body provided a site of debate for those who either supported or opposed corporal punishment. And, just as the short clip of videotape placed Rodney King’s body in a sort of suspended animation where it could be read and examined by a national audience, the media text captured Fay’s body, and placed it on a platform where it could be read, examined, and interpreted by the news audience. And, for economic purposes, news media sought to produce textual interpretations of Michael Fay that would create a dramatic story, which in turn would
generate audience interest in consuming the news product. This was done throughaugmenting the attributes that Michael Fay already possessed, turning him into a livingembodiment of crime and punishment. Fay wasn’t simply an American teenage criminal.In the eyes of the news media, Fay was the American teenage criminal, a “poster child”for issues that were relevant to the news audience.

Thus, if it is indeed the case that the body is a site of symbolism, than modernnews media magnifies this condition. News media, as shown in previous chapters, canproduce an almost unlimited amount of text from any given person, just as USA TODAYcould produce stories about both Bobbi McCaughey and Michael Fay during periodswhen nothing of interest had happened to either person. And while the body mightpossess or perform its own signifying traits, the news media, with its ability to producetexts about the body, can also therefore produce meanings about the particular body thatit examines. Furthermore, if, as Foucault argues, the body can be used as a politicaldevice that can carry out the wills of various institutions, than this also is a condition thatnews media can intensify, particularly when news outlets focus on the debates surrounding the treatment of one particular person, as USA TODAY did in the case ofMichael Fay. When one person is made to be the embodiment of any given conflict, thanwhatever happens to that person’s body is of great interest to any party or institution thathas a stake in the conflict’s outcome.

A Political Battle over a Living Symbol
The Terri Schiavo narrative, as with the previously examined stories, was heavily aided in its construction by the news media. Although it is certainly true that many of the Schiavo news articles were produced in response to legislative and judicial actions concerning the case, it is once again the case that the news media engaged in the production of news content, rather than responsively covering spontaneous events. But unlike the examples discussed in previous chapters, both media outlets and external parties worked complicitly to construct the Schiavo narrative. Mainstream media, having invested heavy interest in Terri Schiavo around the time when her feeding tube would be removed for the last time, needed to sustain the narrative from the moment when she was taken off life support until the inevitable day when she would eventually succumb to death. External parties, including politicians and activists who worked to reverse the removal of Schiavo’s feeding tube, as well as those who disagreed with Congressional intervention in the Schiavo case and felt that Michael Schiavo was justified in removing his wife’s feeding tube, fed the news media the material it needed to manufacture a dramatic and entertaining story. And with almost every fresh article that was produced about Terri Schiavo, a new symbolic trait would be extracted from her body. Inevitably, she would come to represent everything from the interfamilial struggles that can occur regarding a loved one’s death, to the right of the government to intervene in “right to die” cases. The focus of this section will be to examine how each new narrative movement adds new layers of symbolism onto the body of Terri Schiavo.

On February 25, 1990, Terri Schiavo suffered an unexpected heart attack, which stopped oxygen from flowing to her brain, causing her to lapse into a coma (Parker “State” par. 6). She was 26 years old at the time. Schiavo had suffered severe brain
damage from the incident, and while she could breathe on her own, she needed to be fed through a feeding tube in order to be kept alive (Parker “Court Upholds” par. 6).

Unfortunately, Terri had left no living will that could give her family instructions on how to execute her wishes, should she fall into a coma. What ensued was a legal battle between Terri’s husband, Michael Schiavo, and her parents, Robert and Mary Schindler, that would last for fifteen years. Michael Schiavo had routinely pushed to take his wife off life support by removing her feeding tube. Mr. Schiavo filed a petition in Florida state court in 1998 to remove Terri’s feeding tube (“Case Timeline”). In February of 2000, Florida judge George Greer ruled that the feeding tube could be removed. When the tube was finally removed on April 24, 2001, another Florida judge, Frank Quesada, ordered that the feeding tube be reinserted two days later on April 26. Again, Michael Schiavo filed a petition on February 13, 2002. And, once more, circuit judge George Greer, ruled on November of 2002 that the tube could again be removed. After an appeals court reviewed the case, the feeding tube was again removed on October 15, 2003. Shortly thereafter, governor Jeb Bush signed “Terri’s Law,” a bill that ordered the reinsertion of the feeding tube. Nearly one year later on September 23 of 2004, a unanimous decision by the Florida State Supreme Court declared that “Terri’s Law” was unconstitutional. After Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube was again removed on March 18, 2005, Congress would intervene by passing a law that would allow the Supreme Court to hear the Schindler’s case. Shortly thereafter, the U. S. Supreme Court announced its refusal to hear the case. On March 31, 2005, thirteen days after her feeding tube had been removed, Terri Schiavo died.
Although the debate between Michael Schiavo and the Schindlers had been going on for quite some time, media coverage of this story peaked in spring of 2005 when it became apparent that Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube would be removed for the last time. Like the Michael Fay story, much of the Terri Schiavo narrative focused on this debate over whether or not Terri should have been taken off life support. Although it is of course true that this interfamilial conflict was taking place irrespective of media coverage, it is nevertheless equally true that the media worked to augment this battle by discussing the Terri Schiavo story as being a monumental clash between two divergent parties. In this sense, it is again the case that the news media did not simply report on the event, but constructed the event itself through news production. However, since much of the conflict had already taken place prior to the final decision that Terri would be taken off life support for the last time, news media had to ensure that audience interest in the story would still be sustained until the very end.

Since many elements of the Terri Schiavo case were predetermined, this made it easier for the news media to stage the story with all the planning and care of a prefabricated pseudo-event. For example, when the Florida Supreme Court had ordered that Terri’s feeding tube be removed at 1:00 p.m. on March 18, 2005, news reports could build audience suspense until this action actually occurred. An article published in USA TODAY on March 17 titled, “Court Upholds Removal of Feeding Tube,” succinctly notes, “The feeding tube that has kept Terri Schiavo alive for the last 15 years can be removed after 1 p.m. Friday,” which would be one day after this article appeared (par. 2). But also, the article says that both Congress and Florida state legislature were prepared to intervene and stop the removal of the feeding tube. These reports were accurate—the
tube was indeed going to be removed, and lawmakers were certainly going to involve themselves in the Schiavo case. This article nevertheless has a narrative function apart from the mere reporting of news. The indication of forthcoming heightened tragedy and conflict—the climax—guides the audience into the next movement of the story. So, during the early morning hours of Monday, March 21, when Congress passed legislation that would allow the Supreme Court to review and possibly reverse state court decisions that supported removing Terri Schiavo from life support, it was a move that the news audience had been awaiting and anticipating, based on knowledge from previous reports.

The next report, “Congress Enters Schiavo Case,” discusses the passage of the bill by Congress. Forceful quotes from politicians and others help heighten the tension and conflict in the Schiavo narrative. The reporter quotes Tom DeLay, Republican House Majority Leader, as saying “If we do not act, she will die of thirst . . . However helpless, Mr. Speaker, she is alive. She is one of us, and this cannot stand” (par. 2). Those opposing the measures include Democratic representative Jim Davis, who is quoted as saying, “Today, congressional leaders are trying to appoint Congress as a judge and jury,” (par. 8). The strongest response, however, comes from Michael Schiavo himself, who, believing that politicians were using his wife as a political tool, is said to refer to DeLay as a “little slithering snake” (par. 13). Overall, the article works to shift the narrative away from the interfamilial conflict over Terri Schiavo, which had been the news media’s primary interest up until this point. In turn, by focusing on the political fighting over her body, this shows the audience that the outcome of the Schiavo narrative will have effects on a national level, thereby augmenting the level of gravity in the case beyond a mere family battle.
Here then, is where the narrative production of news media intercedes with uses of the body as a symbolic site. The intense coverage devoted to Terri Schiavo during the weeks prior to her removal from life support had worked to build an aura of importance surrounding her body, the treatment of which was once only of concern to her immediate family members. Once placing her in the national spotlight, journalists frequently described Schiavo as embodying everyone and anyone who might find themselves in similar circumstances. Commentators would frequently refer to Terri not as a single woman in a tragic situation, but as a living signifier who represented the dangers of not having a living will. Shortly after Schiavo’s feeding tube was removed, one editorial states:

The wrenching case of Terri Schiavo, the severely brain-damaged Florida woman who has been in a persistent vegetative state for 15 years, has forced many people to think about how life-and-death decisions concerning their own care should be made if they become incapable of stating their wishes.

(“Schiavo Case” par. 1)

In other words, Schiavo was meant to be read by the audience as an example of what could happen to someone, should they not leave written instructions about how to be cared for by family members in case they are unable to care for themselves. The editorial thus suggests that whatever happened to her body would be of great consequence not only to Schiavo and her family, but to the entire national audience, as she was a sort of “everyperson” who embodied the trauma that all readers faced, should they not produce a living will and somehow become incapacitated. Such sentiments would be echoed in later articles, including a feature article instructing readers about how
to make a living will, using Schiavo as a way to lead into the discussion. “The battle
between Terri Schiavo's husband and parents is a call to action for the two-thirds of adult
Americans who, like Schiavo, haven't prepared living wills that help direct their care in
terminal circumstances,” wrote reporter Sharon Jayson. Such articles sent a clear
message to the news audience: “This could be you.”

Thus, the news media frequently invited the news audience to make an
interpersonal identification with Terri Schiavo. Whatever would happen to her would
indicate what could happen to readers, their family members, or their friends. As one
USA TODAY editorial succinctly noted: “She’s . . . the tragic poster child for what can
happen to anyone who hasn't left clear, enforceable instructions regarding end-of-life
choices” (“A Way” par. 4). Again, Schiavo served as a representative example of what
could happen to readers who did not have a living will. But also, Schiavo’s body was
routinely described as a battleground upon which political struggles could be waged. The
editorial also states:

Schiavo has become the sad symbol for ugly family struggles over life-and-
death decisions involving a loved one—and a pawn used to justify outrageous
meddling by ideological activists and politicians in what should be highly
personal medical decisions. (“A Way” par. 3)

Hence, the audience was not only invited to make an interpersonal connection with Terri
Schiavo, but was also asked to view Schiavo as inextricably intertwined with the ideas
with which she had been closely associated: the value of making a living will,
interfamilial struggles that can occur over the death of a loved one, and political interest
in “right-to-die” cases.
Gradually, the narrative focused more on the political conflicts being waged over Schiavo’s body, and less on the interfamilial battle that had been taking place for years prior. Supporters of the Schindlers would not only contend that Terri had not received due process, but also endorsed the possibility that Terri would someday recover and awaken from her coma. In an article expressing his support for the bill passed by the Senate, Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay argued:

Schiavo has been denied even the most routine medical treatment . . . She has been confined to a hospice . . . for five years, the last three of which without permission to even go outside and breathe fresh air. That all of this was happening without so much as a single review of the evidence by a single federal judge was a clear and egregious violation of Schiavo's constitutional rights. (par. 2 – 3)

Likewise, Republican Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist contended that Terri was a “living person who has a level of consciousness,” and thus should not have been taken off life support (Parker et al. par. 34). By contrast, opponents of the measures argued that the federal government was overstepping its boundaries. Democrats accused Republicans of using Schiavo as a political tool. USA TODAY quoted House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer as saying, “Republicans didn’t address this until they saw it would be a huge political issue for them” (par. 25). Likewise, USA TODAY’s own editorial position was largely against federal intervention in the Schiavo case, arguing, “There was no need for intervention by politicians in some far-off capital preening for the next election or trying to distract attention from other issues,” while referring to the passage of the bill as “shameful political grandstanding” (“In Schiavo” par. 8, 6).
On Thursday, March 24, the Supreme Court shortly rejected the opportunity to hear the Schindler’s case, which was consistent with past cases that left decisions regarding right-to-die cases to state courts (Biskupic par. 7). Also, less than a week after the U. S. Supreme Court declined to hear the Schindler’s case, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals would also decline to hear the Schindler’s case for the fourth time. *USA TODAY* quoted a portion of the statement made by Judge Stanley Birch, who argued:

> In resolving the Schiavo controversy, it is my judgment that, despite sincere and altruistic motivation, the legislative and executive branches of our government have acted in a manner demonstrably at odds with our Founding Fathers’ blueprint for the governance of a free people—our Constitution (Parker “Court Rejects” par. 7)

Although there was little chance that the court would have heard the Schindlers at this point, this motion once again solidified the fact that in all probability, Terri Schiavo’s feeding tube would not be reinserted.

There was very little the Schindlers or anyone else could do but wait for the inevitable. Nevertheless, many individuals across the nation had come to feel a deep personal connection to Terri Schiavo. At this point, watching and waiting for Terri Schiavo to die became a national ritual, akin to the burial rituals described by Verdery. Some, motivated largely by religious beliefs, would gradually descend upon Pinellas Park, Florida, to hold a vigil outside the hospice where Terri Schiavo was staying. An article written by reporter Larry Copeland focuses heavily on the religious drives motivating these protests against the removal of Schiavo’s feeding tube. Referring to the protestors, pro-life activist Randall Terry, one of the protest leaders, is quoted as saying,
“Most of them have a high regard for the value of human life and how life has value in the eyes of God” (par. 12). While most of the protestors appear to side with the Schindlers, one woman, Katherine Ewing, whom the article focuses on in particular, takes no side in the conflict. As she tells the reporter: “When you hear both sides, deciding on what the truth is is terribly difficult. I want to be in the truth . . . I feel the only way I can do that is through the Lord’s word. He told me to just come here and read the word” (par. 5 – 6). Others contended that Schiavo had little chance of recovery, as an autopsy would later confirm, and that keeping her in a coma was in actuality, going against her wishes, since according to Michael Schiavo, Terri would not have wanted to live her life in a coma (Stone par. 4). Whatever the case, the news audience had already invested such a heavy stake in Terri Schiavo that her death would become a national event—the culmination of a long battle between those who supported federal intervention and those who did not.

News media thus opened the door for outsiders to argue, and even act upon, their own interpretations of Terri Schiavo. Some, such as Tom DeLay, believed that Schiavo was denied her “equal protection and due process under the law,” as given by the 14th Amendment (DeLay par. 5). Others, believing that Schiavo had already received fair treatment by state courts, would see the attempt at intervention by Congress as an example of an abuse of federal power. Problematically, the resulting struggle over Terri Schiavo would become less about her body, and more about what her body symbolized to either side. As Jonathan Turley, professor of public interest law and contributor to USA TODAY, insightfully pointed out in an editorial written for the publication:
Laying in a persistent vegetative state in Florida, Schiavo has literally become the body politic—a transcendent symbol claimed by rivals in an ongoing cultural war. Ironically, as each side has struggled to embrace her cause, she has become less real, more personification than person (Turley par. 1)

If, as Foucault contends, the body itself is a vehicle of power to carry out the demands of various institutions, then displaying that body on a pedestal, one that is comprised entirely from media text, augments this power to maximum capacity, since whatever happens to that body will ultimately occur in full view of the public. But this process is not as automatic and deterministic as Foucault might argue. Political power is often in a state of flux as parties and interests wrestle with one another over various issues. So too is the power of the body, as its symbolic properties are open to examination and interpretation from divergent viewpoints. Terri Schiavo’s body, captured by the media text, was a site of contested meaning. And as Jonathan Turley so accurately noted, the struggle over Terri Schiavo was less about her as a person, and more about what she symbolized to either side of the debate.

This does not necessarily mean that outsiders, whether members of the Congress, judiciary, or otherwise, were disingenuously involving themselves in the Schiavo conflict for political gain. Rather, because the news media worked to generate audience interest in the Schiavo case through manufacturing a dramatic narrative as well as forging interpersonal connections between Schiavo herself and members of the news audience, the media had also inadvertently set the stage for political conflict, to be waged by those with heavy interest in right-to-die issues and/or concerns about the abuse of federal power. Now, these issues could have, of course, been channeled through any other
person who might have been in the same circumstances as Terri Schiavo. Nonetheless, just as debates over corporal punishment took place over Michael Fay because he happened to be in the public eye at the moment, Terri Schiavo would inspire a vicious debate over the aforementioned concerns. Yet, while Michael Fay was often used by commentators as a launching pad for a discussion about the issue he represented, Terri Schiavo herself would become almost indistinguishable from the issues she was said to have symbolized—so much so that outsiders felt compelled to act on her behalf to serve, what they believed to be the greater social good.

Conclusion

It is, of course, not the purpose of this essay to support or disparage any side in this debate. Rather, it is simply the point here to note that these observations and arguments that were made concerning Terri Schiavo would not have been possible had she not been captured in suspended animation within the media text. Initially, news media outlets concerned themselves with the Terri Schiavo story because of its dramatic and wide-ranging appeal. The family battle between Michael Schiavo and Robert and Mary Schindler was the stuff of television soap opera programs and melodramatic pulp fiction. This battle, however, had largely taken place prior to the heavy media interest in the Schiavo story. Yet, as Daniel Boorstin argues, mass media must engage in the production of information in order to endure. While the initial media production of information regarding Terri Schiavo had made it so that her body could be examined, scrutinized, and turned into metaphor by outside observers, her examination and scrutiny by external actors allowed this media production to continue. Furthermore, as a direct
result of the fact that the examination of Terri Schiavo sustained news production, an almost never-ending amount of symbolic traits could be extracted from her body for as long as she would remain alive. In turn, each new trait that Terri was made to symbolize would generate further concern over what would happen with her body, as both sides of a divided nation came to view her life and her death as more than just moments in a tragic human drama, but as strategic movements in a political battle that would end with the death (or life) of Terri Schiavo.
CONCLUSION: A GLOBAL VILLAGE OF POSTER CHILDREN

Marshall McLuhan once argued that the speed of electronic communication would create a “global village,” where the triumphs, tragedies, strengths and struggles of peoples all over the world would instantaneously and incessantly become common knowledge with the progression of each new day. He writes:

The shock of recognition! In an electric information environment, minority groups can no longer be contained—ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other. (“Medium” 24)

A constant stream of information coming from television, print, and later, computer network communication interconnects the planet to such an extent that the private lives of everyone and anyone can quickly become public knowledge. Moreover, in a world inundated with modern communication technologies, the conception of the “public” itself changes. The “public” expands and contracts simultaneously—persons living halfway across the globe are now as familiar as the next-door neighbor.

And yet, while it is impossible not to marvel at the power of communication to expand human consciousness by making a vast quantity of information more accessible to more people, the quality of said information is so often labeled as nothing more than tabloid garbage in professional guise. Many political economic critics tend to see the news media as nothing more than a propaganda device, that while claiming to be both the fourth estate and a consumer advocate watchdog, is invariably more deferential than pugnacious when reporting on the government and business affairs. On the other side are
critics such as Daniel Boorstin and Neil Postman, who view the news media as perpetuating degraded and stupefying discourse. The former sees the success of mass communication as contributing to an information glut, composed more of pre-fabricated pseudo-events than actual worthwhile news. The latter simply sees most news productions as complicated real-world events drained of all complexities, and organized into sitcom or comic book format. So, if one were to accept all of these criticisms without question, then gossip in the “global village” is a ceaseless conversation, composed primarily of falsehoods and half-truths, conducted by a handful of invalids and game-show hosts.

This is, of course, an overstatement. Nevertheless, labeling mainstream journalism as either propaganda or vapid entertainment would be to ignore much of the subtle, genuinely intelligent conversations that can take place within news discourse. In fact, some of the mechanisms that the aforementioned scholars describe actually facilitate such conversations. The success of advertising supported media has made it such that news can be produced frequently, and in relatively inexpensive and accessible packages. Although some might describe a good portion of news content as being nothing more than “fluff,” some of the previous chapters have hopefully shown that even seemingly lighthearted stories can contain useful bits of knowledge and produce worthwhile discussions. USA TODAY's coverage of the McCaughey septuplets story, for example, while focusing on a seemingly inane and irrelevant occurrence, nevertheless allowed the media to distribute knowledge to the public concerning recent advances in medical technology, fertility drugs, and the complications that can result from multiple births. Even though this knowledge was packaged within a series of melodramatic articles, it
was there nevertheless. Similarly, the Michael Fay story, which was undoubtedly covered because of its shocking and absurd overtones, nonetheless allowed for a public debate over corporal punishment to take place. And while more involved, more in-depth discussions of these respective topics must no doubt exist, the news media gave more accessible versions of these topics to a broader range of people, many of whom hopefully knew at least slightly more than they did before consuming the news product.

Still, there are, of course, potentially negative consequences to a medium that so frequently uses sensational stories as launching pads for discussions of more serious topics. In *The Culture of Fear*, sociologist Barry Glassner discusses the news media’s tendency to magnify relatively small incidences of violence, disaster, disease, and conflict into catastrophic epidemics. For example, despite American Automobile Association statistics that attribute 218 out of 250,000 highway deaths between 1990 and 1997 to angry drivers, “road rage” stories were a hot topic in the mass media during the nineties, overshadowing more prominent dangers such as alcohol-related traffic fatalities, which cause roughly of all fatal accidents (5, 9). Likewise, the Lorena Bobbit incident, in which Bobbit cut off her husband’s penis, sparked media interest in “husband abuse,” despite FBI statistics that show women are more likely to be killed by their boyfriends or husbands, whereas men are rarely killed by their girlfriends or wives (103 – 4). Air disasters are also relatively rare occurrences. “The average person’s probability of dying in an air crash is about 1 in 4 million, or roughly the same as winning the jackpot in the state lottery,” Glassner writes (183). But even when there is no airplane crash to cover, news reports will speculate about potential dangers ranging from the hazards posed by flying on a small commuter plane; lack of child seats on airplanes; counterfeit
replacement airplane parts; and discount airlines (185 – 6, 188 – 191). And finally, although the murder rate fell roughly 20 percent between 1990 and 1998, Glassner reports that network newscasts increased coverage of murders by 600 percent (xxi). Glassner’s fear is that the news media, by fulfilling its need to produce exciting stories on a day-to-day basis, exaggerates dangers and threats to the public. The intense coverage given to the McCaughey septuplets, Michael Fay, and in particular, Terri Schiavo, is not unrelated to this concern. Michael Fay encouraged many to seriously consider implementing corporal punishment penalties in the United States, viewing Fay’s actions as evidence of a growing crime problem and Singapore’s response as a viable solution. To an even greater extent, Terri Schiavo’s story forced many to consider rushing out to write living wills. Now, possessing a living will is not necessarily a bad idea, but when people across the nation begin to throw “living will parties,” as USA TODAY’s Janet Kornblum reported almost one month after Terri Schiavo’s death, one must marvel at the influence the news media can have to both motivate and scare the audience into action.

This then, is one of the problems that can arise when the media grants so much interest to persons such as Terri Schiavo and Michael Fay. Certainly, not everyone who enters news discourse makes national headlines, nor will most of those who do those who do make national headlines receive the same degree of attention as the previously examined persons. Nevertheless, the general postulation that this essay arrives at is that the news media, which seeks to consistently produce entertaining and engaging text for a mass audience, will latch onto those persons whose stories are both sensational and easy to dramatize. Once entering news discourse, these persons then become open to scrutiny and examination from multiple angles, both by the audience and those working in the
news media. Next, in the interests of meeting the demands of news production, journalists will then attempt to extract as much text from the examined person as possible. It is here where there is the greatest potential for the individual body to be turned into a symbol for underlying social, political, and/or cultural conditions. And, when a person such as Michael Fay, described by some as a representation of a growing crime threat and the supposed failures of the American correctional system, received so much attention for so many months, it is only natural that the audience begins to take this representation as reality.

Furthermore, as seen with the case of Terri Schiavo, the consequences can be even more severe when the news media graces the body with symbolic properties. She was, according to members of the news media, an embodiment of what could happen to anyone who does not make out a clear living will, thereby forcing their family to make a decision on the behalf of the incapacitated loved one. Since she was a media fixture for so long, this allowed outsiders the opportunity to stake a claim on Terri, making her body a vehicle by which they could exercise their own particular political ideologies. This struggle over Terri Schiavo discounts criticisms that the news media provides an open pulpit for government officials; if *USA TODAY* is a good representative example for the news media, then the news media covered gave reasonably equal coverage to both sides of the Schiavo conflict. However, what this struggle does show, is the overwhelming power the body can have when placed within news media discourse. So well known was Terri Schiavo, so familiar was she with the news audience, that a political battle could be waged over her body, wherein the spoils would consist largely of symbolism. One side turned her into a figurehead for the right-to-life cause. The other, a figurehead for
opposition to federal intervention in a right-to-die case. Strangely, when Terry died, she would be a martyr for each.

Thus, McLuhan’s phrase is somewhat misleading—the media-dominated world is less a global village than a global passion play. Or perhaps a global dinner theater, where spectators feel obliged to participate in the drama, shouting their comments, cat-calls, and criticisms to the actors on stage. The characters are certainly played by real people. The McCaugheys play the small town couple who overcomes almost insurmountable odds. Mary Kay Latourno plays the seductive temptress. Michael Fay plays the reckless teenager. Lorena Bobbitt plays a woman scorned and out for revenge. Terri Schiavo and her loved ones play the roles of family members torn apart by tragic circumstance. The list is endless, as a team of scriptwriters called journalists stand by, ready and waiting to write them into a play, where each character will be made to represent some deep human truth—a symbolic representation of “the way the world is.”
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