

Fake News and the Mainstream Media

Long before fake news became a hot topic, liberals in the mainstream media were practicing their own special brand of fake news. They weren't misleading the public for malicious reasons; quite the opposite. They were simply showing off their humanity.

The best examples of this *fake news-for-a-good-cause* go back to the 1980s, when two of the biggest stories in America involved the rise in homelessness (in the age of Reagan) and the national scare over a new disease called AIDS. I was a correspondent at CBS News at the time and I witnessed first hand how – and *why* – the media got both those stories monumentally wrong.

Let's start with the homeless.

The networks were doing lots of homeless stories back then and the homeless we put on TV almost always looked just like you and your next-door neighbors.

Except the homeless I saw on the streets of New York didn't look anything like that. Most of them were either alcoholics, or drug addicts, or were talking to space ships in the sky.

But reporters felt they needed to portray the homeless as people just like you and me. In fact, Tom Brokaw actually said that the homeless are "people you know."

How could serious reporters really think the homeless by and large were people we knew in our everyday lives? They saw the homeless on the streets. They saw what I saw. It didn't take an investigative reporter to figure out that the homeless living in cardboard boxes in the freezing cold were nothing like the Americans who were watching Tom Brokaw on TV.

But the homeless lobby had an agenda and they needed their liberal friends in the media to help them pursue it. They needed to drum up compassion for the homeless – and one way to do it was to convince reporters that the homeless were just regular folks brought down by a bad break. And journalists, who pride themselves on their compassion, gladly went along. After all, if the homeless were mainly a bunch of winos and junkies the public might not want to fund government welfare programs to help them. But if they were “people you know” we’d all be more sympathetic. (Besides, putting homeless folks on TV who look just like the audience helps boost ratings.)

So liberal reporters became cheerleaders for a liberal cause they believed in. And something similar happened with AIDS. In the 1980s, journalists were spreading an epidemic – of fear. And that too was based on fake news.

A headline in U.S. News & World Report said, “The disease of *them* is suddenly the disease of *us*.”

The Atlantic Monthly headlined a cover story with this: “Heterosexuals and AIDS: The Second State of the Epidemic.”

The Ladies Home Journal ran a story with this tease on the cover: “AIDS & Marriage: What Every Wife Must Know.”

Life magazine ran a cover with this scary headline: “Now No One Is Safe from AIDS.”

And in 1987, one of the most famous and beloved Americans weighed in with a dire warning. “AIDS has both sexes running scared. Research studies now project that one in five heterosexuals could be dead from AIDS at the end of the next three years. That’s by 1990. One in five. It is no longer just a gay disease. Believe me.”

Who wouldn’t believe Oprah Winfrey?

Except she was dead wrong and so was just about everybody in

the mainstream media. There was nothing resembling a heterosexual epidemic. Absolutely nothing.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, by the end of 1999, about 50 percent of those who had come down with AIDS were men who had sex with other men; 28 percent were IV drug users; 6 percent were men who had sex with men *and* injected drugs. There were also some cases tied to blood transfusions that were infected with HIV, the AIDS virus.

Journalists should have wondered: If AIDS is breaking out into heterosexual America, why haven't I witnessed entire neighborhoods wiped out by the disease? That's what was happening in gay neighborhoods in San Francisco, so why wasn't it happening in suburban towns across the rest of the country?

They didn't ask those questions because they didn't want to know the answers.

So again, journalists misled the American people – and again, for a “good cause.” Just as the homeless had to be our friends and neighbors – or else we might not spend enough on them – people with AIDS also had to be just like us – or else the public might not care enough to spend federal tax dollars to find a cure for a disease that mainly hit gays and junkies.

Let's be clear: If even one person has AIDS it is a terrible tragedy. And the government had a moral responsibility to help find a cure for a disease that was killing so many people. But journalists can't become cheerleaders – no matter how worthy the cause.

And in many ways the mainstream journalism version of fake news is worse than what the social media version, where jerks put out ridiculous stories about non-existent underage sex rings run by Hillary Clinton out of a pizza parlor.

Unlike the social media clowns, mainstream journalists have legitimacy. They help set the national agenda. They influence

legislation. And it's not just about fake homeless and AIDS stories. They're still putting out fake news – about the supposed sexist wage gap between men and women doing the same job with the same experience (– if that were true why wouldn't companies only hire women and save a boatload of money in labor costs?); about the *epidemic* of rape on college campuses; about the *99 percent* of scientists who supposedly believe Al Gore's version of global warming and think everyone else is an ignorant science "denier."

But hey, they're faking the news for good causes, right?