

Media Sensationalism is Damaging; Still Better Than Bias

☒ When I was a teenager, a man tried to rob a grocery store down the street from where I lived. I read about it a day or two later in my local newspaper. The story was of particular interest to me because my brother worked at that grocery store as a cashier, and he was actually the person who the man tried to rob.

In his piece, the newspaper reporter described the incident in great detail. He chronicled how the man approached my brother at the customer service desk, pointed a handgun at him through his jacket pocket, and demanded money from the cash register.

In what resembled a scripted scene from a Dirty Harry movie, the piece detailed how my brother fearlessly held his ground, and told the would-be robber to “get a job.” The man was apparently so rattled by this bold, intimidating reaction that he quickly left the store. He tried instead to rob a Burger King across the street.

It was a pretty enthralling story for a kid my age – one that should have impressed the hell out of me. I never would have guessed, after all, that my mild-mannered brother was really a bad-ass.

The only problem was that the account wasn't true. It wasn't even close, really.

The actual story was that my brother had no idea he was even being robbed. When the man approached him at the grocery store, my brother never saw any hint of a concealed gun being pointed at him. When the man asked for money, my brother thought he was joking.

“Well, I can’t give you any money, but I *can* give you a job application if you like,” my brother jested.

The man repeated his request, and my brother still wasn’t getting it. He joked with the man some more.

Eventually a couple of customers approached the desk and stood in line behind the man. They were every bit as oblivious of the robbery attempt as my brother was. However, the increased attention unnerved the man to the point where he left the store. Empty-handed, he tried his luck at the next business down the street.

Well, that attempt didn’t go so well either. The man was apprehended (I believe by an off-duty police officer) at Burger King. While in handcuffs, the man admitted that he had first tried to rob the grocery store. If he hadn’t made that admission, no one would have known about the incident.

The reporter knew the truth about what happened in the grocery store. My brother gave him an honest account of what went down during the interview. The reporter simply recognized that it wasn’t all that exciting of a story. Thus, he took some liberties and spiced it up to garnish some increased attention from his readers.

This was my first experience with media sensationalism. It was also the first time that I began to question how seriously journalists took their jobs. Being a young man in my teens at the time, I didn’t fully appreciate the importance of the role of the news media in our society. I did, however, understand that reporters were at least supposed to be telling us the truth.

Now that I’m older and hopefully wiser, I understand why it’s done: Readership and ratings. The more enthralling the story, the more attention that is received. The more attention that is received, the more advertising revenue that comes in.

A large portion of the reporting on Malaysian Airlines flight MH370, for example, has been pure sensationalism. People are very interested in the story in large part because of its mysterious nature. Thus, the more exotic journalists can make the story, the better it is for readership and ratings. It's the reason why we're seeing an almost endless array of bizarre (borderline perverse) theories being entertained by supposedly reputable news sources.

When UFO experts, psychics, and Geraldo Rivera are put in front of cameras and asked to speculate on such a topic, you know you've pretty much hit rock bottom.

While I believe that media sensationalism does do damage to the credibility of our news sources, I'll take it any day of the week over ideological media bias. Why? Because sensationalism doesn't do immense damage to *society*. 

Society can navigate virtually unscathed through stories of renegade cashiers and missing airplane fantasies. We're done an enormous disservice, however, when we receive dishonest reporting on the things that affect our very way of living. Without honest reporting on topics like the state of the economy, the healthcare law, education, and what our elected leaders are up to, we find ourselves making very poor decisions. And when we make poor decisions on things so incredibly important, it affects not only our lives but the lives of future generations.

If the news media insists on enchanting society, that's one thing. If they insist on changing it to align with their ideological views, that's downright dangerous.