

# **Treasure in the Trash: Why Society Needs**

## **Sensationalism**

by Caitlin Marie Fortier

Whether they want to admit it or not, everyone loves to look at car crashes, tut-tut over a neighbor's private scandal or speculate wildly as to what the neighborhood youths might be doing when their parents aren't looking. In gawking at someone's misfortune or in creating juicy stories out of an insignificant incident we reaffirm our own sense of security and intrinsic goodness (generally by reflecting on someone else's lack thereof) while doing so can be an important source of entertainment. Therefore, does it not make sense that reporters, as faithful servants to the public good, should assist in this? If a "hack reporter" can make at least one person feel intellectually or morally superior, isn't he doing just as much good as a strict disciple of objective facts? By picking up on even the most mundane of petty thefts, drug busts or by endlessly repeating the same facts with slightly different theories or tragic accidents or murders, various news agencies are fulfilling two very important human needs at once: the need to be entertained and a certain thirst for knowledge. Lastly, spinning a human tragedy into a vast epic of good versus evil also enables us to create a modern mythology of villains, victims and heroes, although these stories tend to contain much more of the first two. With this information in mind, it becomes apparent that the question "is crime reporting too sensational?" can only be answered by a resounding cry of "why isn't it sensational enough?"

One easy way to make anyone feel better is to point out how unlucky, immoral or just plain stupid someone else is. Case in point: "Kentucky Prisoner Punches out Court-Appointed Council" (February 7, Edmonton Sun). Nothing makes even the more egregious everyday

breaches of common sense seem almost intelligent quite like reading about someone “punching out” the person responsible for your defense while you’re actually in the courtroom. True, this is a small incident happening far away that would probably not affect the average Edmontonian, but its irrelevance is more than offset by the fact that even someone reading this article in a jail cell can feel reassured by the contrast between the accused man in Kentucky and him or herself. In bringing to light these obscure instances of exceedingly poor judgment and low personal moral standards, the writer helps to reinforce the reader’s own personal feeling of self-worth, which can most definitely have a positive affect on communities or society as a whole. After all, low self-esteem has been associated with a host of problems—alcohol and drug abuse, gambling addiction, eating disorders and suicide being only the tip of the iceberg—so by bringing to light and ridiculing such acts, much good can be done.

Often it is suggested that people today are less well-informed about their world than they should be. While it *is* important to be aware of the events taking place in our communities and around the world, sometimes it may be tiresome for some to wade through long print articles with dull headlines in order to gain this necessary information. Thus, snappy headlines such as “‘Dr. Horror’ Arrested in Nepal”<sup>1</sup> (The Hamilton Spectator, Feb 7/2008), attract the readers attention and lead them to read the story more easily than “Brampton MD Found in Nepal” (The Toronto Star, Feb 7/2008). Although both articles both involve the same instance of a doctor accused of heading an illegal organ-smuggling ring which “forcibly removed” the organs in question from impoverished victims, the Hamilton version of the story is more sensationally presented, and thus more appealing to the reader’s desire to be entertained while still imparting approximately the same information. As attention spans decrease in children, this presentation will become even more important in the future when these easily-distracted youngsters become old enough to pay attention to the news, and require at least some entertainment value mixed with the information just to stay somewhat focused.

One important facet of any culture is folklore, which expresses and reinforces cultural values and lessons<sup>2</sup>. Like the ancient village storyteller, a sensationalist reporter can use a basis of fact in order to create a sort of modern folklore that captivates the viewer or reader, while revealing important socioethical rules of the culture it is a part of. Take, for instance, the famous murder of Laci Peterson by her husband. Although one way of looking at this case is from the perspective that this is just a tragedy and crime, the way that this story was perceived and reported reflected the values of the culture. For instance, take this example from a story that ran in the National Enquirer:

*“In a bombshell death row confession, Scott Peterson has at last revealed how he mercilessly strangled his pregnant wife Laci as she happily watched a Martha Stewart TV show.*

*Then the coldblooded monster calmly read "Playboy" in his fishing boat before dumping her body overboard” (Dec 12, 2007)*

Not only does this come from an issue published more than five years after the crime<sup>3</sup> (indicating that there is a definite public interest) but the writer has stated quite bluntly that Scott Peterson is a “coldblooded monster” and suggests that he is some sort of pervert by mentioning his choice of reading material. By contrast, Laci was presented in The Enquirer as a “pretty mom-to-be, filled with hope and dreams for the future”, solidly portraying her as a pure innocent. Although simplifying something as complicated as a murder case into “good vs. evil” will always sacrifice some of the objectivity and subtlety, by presenting the murder in a black-and-white manner, the story is easier to understand. When viewed in this way, the endless coverage and volumes of editorials devoted to this case and various theories as to what happened (no matter how sensational) are not the exploitation of a crime by the press, but simply a natural response to the case based on the cultural need for villains and victims to reaffirm our own beliefs.

Given the previous arguments, it becomes apparent that the sensational reports of crimes are desirable and beneficial. Turning a single event from just another murder into a tale of good and evil reaffirms cultural values, and by making the news more accessible greater viewership and/or readership can be achieved. By bringing out the most salacious aspects of a case, it can also reinforce the self-worth of the reader. It is simply human nature to enjoy a sensational story, and if there is one thing that tabloid news stories have to teach us, it is that no good can come with defying the natural order.