

JFK Slaying: Who Owns The Truth?

COVERING THE BODY

The Kennedy Assassination, the Media and the Shaping of Collective Memory

By Barbie Zelizer

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By Todd Gitlin

Barbie Zelizer, a former Reuter reporter now teaching rhetoric and communication at Temple University, argues toward the end of "Covering the Body" that the journalistic onslaught on Oliver Stone for "JFK" early this year was one skirmish in a long-running turf fight. For almost 30 years journalists have claimed a special authority over the Kennedy assassination story. They had gone there, they had filmed, they had testified. Therefore they saw Stone as an upstart, a poacher. Stone asked for trouble with his claim to truth and his dubious Vietnam theory, not only because his claim to the truth was shaky but because he had the audacity to lay claim at all. He walked into an ambush.

In this year of widely publicized fights over the authorized versions of key events from 1492 to 1963, Zelizer's starting point is an important one: Collective memory is not automatic. The various custodians of public knowledge—journalists, historians, independent investigators—fight over whose version is to become legitimate. Zelizer's book tracks the struggle for possession of the assassination in the nation's imagination. Starting in 1963, journalists, especially at the television networks, have used their performance in the assassination story to upgrade their authority—and the authority of television journalism in general. They have made it "their story" as they have also made themselves so central to it as to virtually seize the events from historians.

The principal means for this victory, Zelizer argues, is that "the journalist-as-teller became embedded in the event's retelling." Walter Cronkite shedding a tear was not only the nation's reporter, he was the nation's channel for grief. Mourning became electronic. As a result, the story transmitted, the story still enshrined in perennial reruns, is a story that stars Cronkite and Dan Rather. Radio and other local journalists who first reported important facts were downgraded in memory. Since then, "anniversary journalism" has featured television journalists referring to old film of themselves telling the story, and news organizations using the assassination to anchor their reputations.

usually didn't get much of the story. The coverage was prompt and comprehensive but fraught with problems: Journalists did not see Kennedy shot, sometimes did not hear Kennedy shot, filed reports on the basis of hearsay and rumor, lacked access to recognizable and authoritative sources, and processed faulty information." Despite all the scores of journalists following Kennedy's limousine—"covering the body," in journalistic lingo—it was amateur photographers like Abraham Zapruder who got the important pictures, just as, 28 years later, it was plumber George Holliday's amateur video that delivered the news about the beating of Rodney King.

Zelizer is right that in today's version of the events, anything that appeared on television (the assassination of the assassin, the funeral) looms especially large. She is timely when she reminds us that the clutter of cameras and cameramen in Dallas police headquarters helped make it possible for Jack Ruby to murder Oswald—and reminds us too that journalists themselves have sometimes worried about their complicity. But in her zeal to show that journalists have inflated their own significance and thereby mythologized the assassination, she sometimes unfairly overgeneralizes about their gullibility. She omits, for example, Robert MacNeil's skepticism about the Warren Commission's official version—apparently, as he ran into the Texas School Book Depository to find a phone he passed Lee Harvey Oswald exiting, which casts some doubt on the official timetable. But overall, she rightly criticizes television's longtime reluctance to criticize the Warren Commission, or to take seriously the research of independent critics.

"As long as the public fails to question journalists' cultural authority," Zelizer writes, "it will be unable to question, challenge, or limit it." But a skeptical public already doubts journalism more than Zelizer, and many other media critics, recognize. Zelizer fails to ask, let alone explain, how a public flooded by credulous media could have ended up so skeptical of the official version.

There is an irony hovering over this book—an irony Zelizer should appreciate. To establish her own academic legitimacy through a university press, Zelizer has written in such a way as to weaken her own claim to authority outside the academy. In today's gnarled groves, the code of legitimacy permits, even seems to require, a thick larding of "valorizing," "reconfiguring" and "referencing" (no typo: the noun is verbed). Her book repeats, and repeats, and milks the obvious for dwindling drops of insight. The author announces that certain points will be made, makes them, then announces that they have been made. Alas, the jargon, the pile-on and the sometimes murky logic and syntax limit the value of this provocative study.

The reviewer, a professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, is the author of "Inside Prime Time," "The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage," and a novel,

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