

Meg Greenfield

The News Business

You can hardly turn on the television these days without encountering a panel of journalists wringing their hankies over what has happened to our business. Their melancholy is brought on by a feeling that onetime serious news organizations have abandoned the coverage of legitimate news for trivia, sensationalism, movie-star gossip and embarrassing sexual revelations about people who were dumb enough to pay by personal check. O, gloom—except, of course, that we seem to have a variety of explanations for the problem that, conveniently enough, lay the responsibility elsewhere.

My view is that 1) these explanations are mainly phony and 2) real, interesting news just waiting to be reported is as available and accessible as it ever was, but we are too often looking in the wrong place.

The first and most familiar (and most offensive) of the phony explanations is the bread-and-circuses one. In it, we journalists become the wise teachers and magistrates and the public becomes the rabble. This public has no attention span to speak of and no interest in the serious issues of our time. Therefore we are only giving our audience what it wants. This condescending attitude, which implies an audience or readership interested only in glitz and gore, shows only how far some of us have strayed from any understanding at all of people who are not journalists. And that is, when you think

about it, a pretty large group to misunderstand. I mean, it's practically everybody.

The evidence of public lack of interest in what journalists regard as important issues most recently has taken the form of repeated assertions that *the public doesn't care about reform of the campaign finance system*. Well, who does when you put it that way? "Reform of the campaign finance system" is one of those mind-deadening terms that stop not only conversation but thought, threatening an endless vista of arguments about this provision and that waiver and the other loophole. But put it in terms of what the reform is for and about—the fact that those with a lot of money get a lot more political, personal and financial favors from our government than the average person can dream of—and you go right to an issue that intensely interests (and angers) people. So to some extent it is our own abstract way of telling stories that discourages interest—fast track, nuclear nonproliferation and so on. The reality behind the description is often one that has great meaning for people who skip over the shorthand description or academic-sounding story, but do worry in a different context about its implication for their own lives. There's nuclear nonproliferation ... and there's Iran getting the bomb.

Every now and again the journalistic establishment notices the gulf between itself and its

presumed mass audience and takes steps to close it. These steps are about as self-conscious and artificial as anything can be, and by their very nature they indicate why the gulf exists and how

Have the media abandoned serious journalism for the trivial, or are we looking in the wrong places for stories?

broad it is. For periodically, starting back in the days of the so-called "silent majority," journalists in teams would go out to report on the American public as if it were a bunch of exotic South Sea islanders. These accounts, generally thought by those who produced them to be sympathetic, only accentuated the impression of distance and detachment between the journalists on the one hand, who behaved as if they were cultural anthropologists in a strange land, and the people they were covering, on the other. And the fact is that, despite all the denials, there is a tendency among the media to

think of the public as not quite ready for or up to the seriousness of the issues themselves, and thus in continuous need of an introduction of melodrama and thrills into the news to get and hold their attention. The sensational print version of this in the hyped-up, screaming headline, etc., is familiar to all.

I became aware of this in a particular way last summer as a result of watching a lot of TV news shows, early morning and early evening especially. Even where there was an indisputably valid news story, a couple of things seemed always to happen. One was that there was a certain circus-barker quality to the way the story was introduced (we do this in the papers and magazines, too; it's far from an electronic monopoly). The other was that there sometimes seemed to be almost a lusting after gruesome news and a perceptible disappointment in being denied it. For about 10 days, it seemed to me, two stories dominated an otherwise fairly bland news landscape. One was that of the Mir space station, about which I believe we all by now know at least 300 times more than we need to. The other was the prospect of the Soufriere Hills volcano on the island of Montserrat erupting big time while a bunch of dogged residents refused to leave and seek safety. Montserrat and its potential horror led the news repeatedly. Mir was the object of endless interviews with space scientists, some of

whom seemed to irritate their interviewers by refusing to deem the situation perilous. Every day when either story was introduced you got just the tiniest hint that before it was over *there might be flying body parts*. That is the press ratcheting up the prospective sensation in the story, presumably on the theory that this is what its readers and viewers want.

To my mind the wonderful irony in all this is that the truly big and interesting news stories of the past few years have not been those rewed-up, could-be-a-tragedy stories or the sexual-scandal stuff that we print or broadcast and then hold seminars to decide whether we should have or not. The big stories have been those concerning what looked, from the outside, to be the most plain vanilla, noncontroversial institutions: the United Way of America, the government of Switzerland, the health-insurance organizations whose executives were ripping off everything not nailed down. We should stop looking for the bizarre and take a good look at the seemingly respectable. That's where the real news always turns up, including the truly bizarre. We used to know this before we got lost in debate about Marv Albert's right to privacy.

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