

of "impressive anecdotal evidence" that television need not drug and stupefy youngsters is "wild whoops of joy and anger from kids pounding, pulling, and pushing images across the screen" in video-game establishments. Are riots at rock concerts similarly reassuring?

Common sense is with him when he argues that if used in imaginative ways, television can help youngsters to learn. (He is especially enthusiastic about the Carmen Sandiego video games, which sound like good stimulating fun.) And amid his rejoicings over whoopee interactivity, Davis also comes out in favor of books that do not pop or sizzle, noting that despite the bleak predictions of critics, more people seem to be reading these days. That's encouraging, but it hardly exhausts the question of television's influence on what is being read or how it is being absorbed.

Even at its most sensible, *Five Myths* is off-putting. The pages are clogged with phrases like "the welter of invective seeking to find mechanistic explanations for deep structural flaws," "the individuating potential of the VCR," and "the arrival of an intensified verbal-visual literacy, informed by the divided or all-encompassing view of life evidenced in our sample." The repeated use of "impacted" as a transitive verb is especially jarring, but no doubt he is riding the wave of the future on that one.

Davis does a lot of name-dropping, sometimes in a peculiarly intrusive way, writing, for example, "from what Edmund Burke might have called from the sublime to the ridiculous." (Incidentally, my *Bartlett's* traces it to Napoleon Bonaparte.) He can't use "Let me count the ways" without mentioning Elizabeth Barrett Browning; and he hauls in the plot of *King Lear* in a labored analysis of what happened in the 1992 presidential election. (I think Larry King played Cordelia.) You may get the impression that Davis is showing off by dusting off his Shakespeare.

"Life, not TV, now drives the world," he announces, as though that needed announcing. But the question, of course, is what part television is playing in life. At its best, *The Five Myths of Television Power* provides glimmers, but, as Robert must have told Elizabeth the hundredth time she started counting the ways, Enough already.

FOUR DAYS IN NOVEMBER

BY JAMES BOYLAN

In the beginning came the Four Days — on Friday, the killing of the president; on Saturday, the grieving in Washington; on Sunday, the shooting of the presumed assassin; on Monday, the rites. Then, on Tuesday, reluctant resumption of the nation's business.

To those who lived through it as members of the television audience, the sequence seemed to unfold like fate. But Barbie Zelizer contends here that the "master narrative" of the Four Days was not fated but constructed by jour-

COVERING THE BODY: THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION, THE MEDIA, AND THE SHAPING OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

BY BARBIE ZELIZER
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nalists, particularly by national television journalists, and that they have maintained the story in its classic form ever since. Journalists, she says, made themselves "into authoritative spokespersons for the story in its entirety, not just for the discrete moments of coverage they personally saw and heard (or, in the worst of cases, did not see and did not hear)." Although this phrasing suggests some kind of falsification, I think that Zelizer means only to suggest that journalists, having been able to see only fragments of the story, were forced to assemble it as best they could, and eventually to stitch the weekend's entire bizarre sequence into a whole.

The resulting narrative, Zelizer says, was designed to "lend closure to the events of Kennedy's death," to "guide the American people through shock, grief, and reconciliation." But one element of closure — a generally accepted explanation of the events — has proved elusive. The underlying message of the

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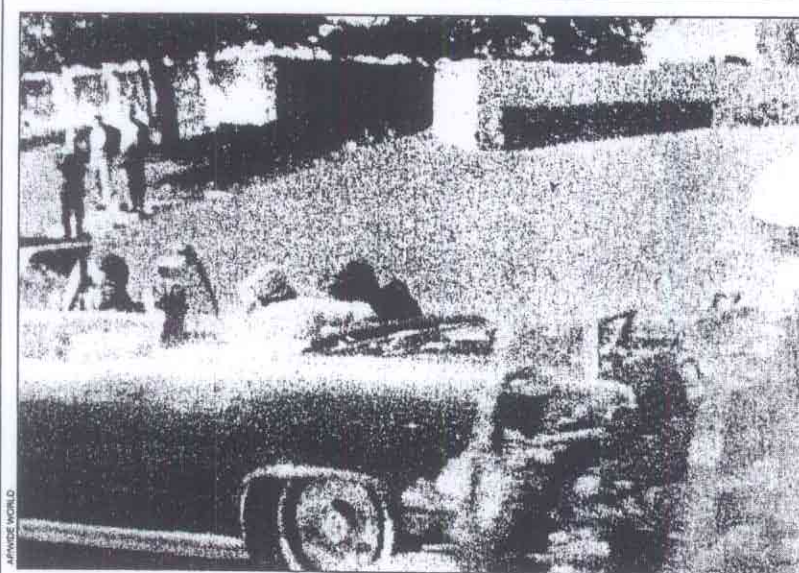
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Four Days narrative was that the shootings of Kennedy and Oswald were only what they appeared to be on the surface — isolated, traumatic, individual incidents that may have tested but ultimately vindicated the American system. But I wonder whether the narrative did not have a side effect: at the very time that it was trying to consign the weekend to history, did not journalism's intense concentration on the Four Days — "seventy hours and thirty minutes" of television, as NBC boasted — help create Americans' long-term obsession with the assassination? The Four Days narrative offered a beginning and a sadly triumphant ending without a true resolution. People long to have great explanations for great events. Conspiracy theories, however ill-supported, have filled this bill better than the straight-ahead, even banal Four Days narrative.

Not surprisingly, journalists who were involved in the assassination story twenty-nine years ago have retained a kind of proprietary interest in the square version. Many, not all, supported the flawed Warren Commission report. More recently, their furious reaction to the conspiracies hypothesized in Oliver Stone's film *JFK* — which came along just in time to provide Zelizer with an epilogue — revealed not only annoyance at what they consider fictionalization of fact but, yet again, their deep commitment to their original story of catastrophe and recovery.

Was the "master narrative" of the four days following the Kennedy assassination constructed by journalists?

Zelizer also makes a point of arguing that the assassination story has well rewarded the storytellers, the journalists. Initially, the narrative permitted journalists to place themselves prominently at the center of events, even when, as was often the case, they were not reporters but overseers sitting in a studio in New York.

Over time, the narrative was smoothed out. Journalists other than the narrators tended to disappear from the story; troubling questions raised about inaccurate reporting and moblike media behavior in Dallas faded. Journalists associated with the story — Dan Rather, Walter Cronkite, Tom Wicker, Edwin Newman, John Chancellor, for example — became celebrities ranking with those actually involved in the transfer of power. Through association with the assassination, television news received new legitimation; individual careers advanced; professional values were tested and reaffirmed.

Or so goes the argument. Zelizer does not make clear to what degree she believes intent, or calculation, was involved in this purported self-enhancement, and as a result implies that journalists saw the assassination as little more than a career opportunity. If true, the insinuation needs better evidence than is offered here. Moreover, there is

an implicit suggestion that such figures as Rather and Wicker owe their success to the assassination. This may be true in a very limited sense for Rather; for Wicker, it is ridiculous.

Moreover, I think that, to support her contention of aggrandizement, Zelizer overemphasized journalistic self-congratulation after the assassination — job well done, and all that. In an instance in which I have personal knowledge, she says that such "semitrade" publication as the *Columbia Journalism Review* "were generally quick to laud journalists for their coverage." I have dug out that old issue of Winter 1964, which I edited, and read it for the first time in years, and find that it is hardly a whitewash. Still, it is possible to see that on reprinting of reporters' accounts of the work in Dallas, which I recall as having the purpose of showing the uncertainty and inconsistency of what, under stress, even journalists might recall, Zelizer may have read as glamorization.

This book presents a meaty thesis in a fresh scholarly context — that is, exploration of the notion of journalists as a "interpretive community" with power to affect what is known, rather squishily, as "collective memory." But I still do not warm to it. I may be out of the loop and beyond the Beltway, but I have never heard the term of the title — "covering the body" — used for the assignment to cover the president, and the literal turn Zelizer gives it here is too pat. Nor do I like the studied chilliness in tone and building-block style of writing, which assume stems from the book's origin in a dissertation. I suppose that this can be excused as the author's attempt to legitimate herself in an interpretive community of a different kind.

Even so, this is a work that advances understanding of journalism beyond the old transmission model — the one that pictured journalists as merely processors who took raw data, reprocessed it, and regurgitated it to the waiting public. Something more important happens in that relationship, for the shape that journalists give their stories has the power to affect our enduring historical memories and to place the journalists themselves at the center of those memories.