

Making News

The media's reaction to JFK Jr.'s death has killed my faith in them. Every paper and TV station is telling me how all good Americans feel about this event, and apparently I know no good Americans. I imagine this is how it must have felt to be in Communist Russia when some Party figure died. The people were told how to feel as relentlessly as our media dramatizing this event.

I understand that three human beings are dead, and that is a tragedy for those who knew them and were touched by them. This piece is not intended to mock the legitimate grief of those who feel it. If you were touched by this man, please accept my condolences. Compassion for a person's death will never earn my scorn. People are devastated by this, but not, in my experience the majority of the nation.

Journalism is a public trust. We trust that the stories printed in our newspapers and shown on our television screens are reasonable reflections of the world. If the news reports a fire, there should be ashes there if I look. If the news tells me a nation is in mourning, I should encounter some mourners during the day.

Other events certainly have generated such outpourings of national sympathy. I didn't imagine all those yellow ribbons during the Gulf War and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. I still see red ribbons for AIDS awareness. But even though the press is producing constant coverage of the crash and failed rescue, the only outpourings of emotion I see are on television.

Too often in recent years news media have been accused of creating the news. They have reported on amalgams of people as though they were one. They have rigged demonstrations of dangerous automobiles. Occasionally they have just made up stories completely. All of that is a breach of the public trust and earns them derision, but at least they had the good sense to lie about things the average person can't confirm for themselves.

An average person is not going to take their car out and try to get it to explode to confirm a news report. They're not going to interview a bunch of inner-city youths and make sure that the news media hasn't fictionalized their accounts. That should not be the consumer's job; editors are supposed to do all that. Unfortunately, editors too often are of the opinion that if no one will check their work, they just won't do it.

This sorry state of affairs is not new. Scare-tactic journalism and sensationalism have been rampant for years. What is new and surprising is how brazen media manipulation of this death has been. Days of multi-hour special coverage and multiple front-page newspaper stories tout a nation in mourning, telling Americans how and when to mourn. Only I can't find anyone who feels that way. The media is making up a story that I can confirm by looking out my window and talking to my friends. It's like telling me that the sun went out.

Disturbingly, I initially felt vaguely disquieted because I didn't fit the mourner profile that the media propagating. It's like I'm somehow patriotically deficient because I'm not crippled with grief by this event. But I know that given the proper stimulus I'm, in the words of David Lynch, the Sultan of Sentiment. I felt the queasy jitters of war when the US entered into hostilities with Iraq. I can still remember the vertiginous feeling I had watching the Challenger explode. I am emotionally attached to the nation around me, just not to John Kennedy's son. I resent the media's constant insinuation that I am un-American because I'm not in mourning.

Ultimately, that's why the media have lost me. Given the media's collective (and righteous) resistance to Congressional attempts to make them produce entertainment that's in the fictional National interest, it's hypocritical to manufacture an equally fictional National sentiment to boost their ratings.

Worse than that, manufacturing a set of Emperor's clothes that is so transparent implies that the media believe that people have no other source of information, even talking to the people around them. I'd like a news source that thinks I'm smarter than that.

