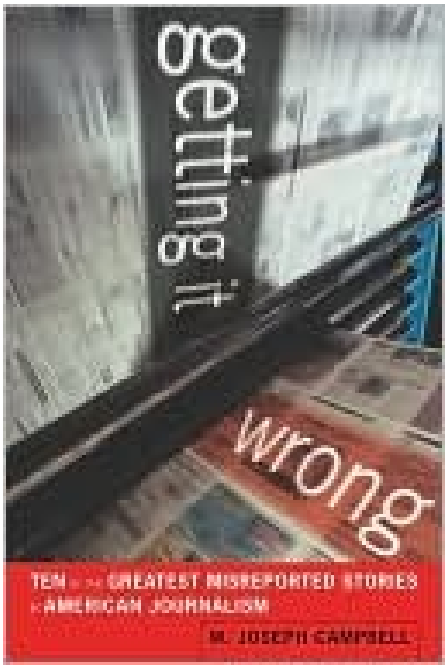

Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism

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Did the "Washington Post" bring down Richard Nixon by reporting on the Watergate scandal? Did a cryptic remark by Walter Cronkite effectively end the Vietnam War? Did William Randolph Hearst vow to "furnish the war" in the 1898 conflict with Spain? In "Getting It Wrong," W. Joseph Campbell addresses and dismantles these and other prominent media-driven myths-stories about or by the news media that are widely believed but which, on close examination, prove apocryphal. In a fascinating exploration of these and other cases-including the supposedly outstanding coverage of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina-Campbell describes how myths like these can feed stereotypes, deflect blame from policymakers, and overstate the power and influence of the news media.

Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism Details

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From Reader Review Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism for online ebook

Beth says

This is - quite something. It's certainly persuasive, I'll give it that. I can't say I buy into it fully, because it's ideological in turn (and doesn't try to mask that), but certain elements of its point of view are eloquent and well-stated:

> For journalists, these myths are very seductive: they place the news media at the epicenter of vital and decisive moments of the past, they tell of journalistic bravado and triumph, and they offer memorable if simplistic narratives that are central to journalism's amour propre. They also encourage an assumption that, disruption and retrenchment in their field notwithstanding, journalists can be moved to such heights again. Remembering and repeating these romanticized tales is perhaps understandable in that they bring some measure of reassurance to a battered profession.

I did have a lot of quibbles - for example, I'd also trust Murrow over a muckraker, and I'd certainly assume Murrow had a bigger audience; saying "why didn't everyone realize this story had been broken before?" in the days before social media and the easy spread of news stories seems reductive. I also didn't trust a lot of the poll numbers on McCarthy; to me, they *did* show a drop after Murrow's story.

But the psychology of a lot of these chapters reads as sound to me. The idea of news media over-inflating the *War of the Worlds* radio program to blame radio, because they were threatened by this new upstart medium - well. Gotta say: that sounds entirely plausible.

Mark says

Dry & scholarly... but interesting subject matter: the mis-reporting of the Katrina aftermath, the herofication of Cronkite, Murrow and Woodward & Bernstein, the NY Times "spiking" the Bay of Pigs preparations, as well the myth about Hearst starting the Spanish-American war. The book doesn't really demonize any of these people (except possibly Mayor Nagin in New Orleans) but instead tries to separate what actually happened from the pro-journalism myth-making that has crept up around these stories.

Off the wall note: funny to me that a guy name Joseph Campbell who ISN'T "the" Joseph Campbell is writing about some form of mythology.

Jeff Raymond says

There's good and bad to this book, and the good overall outweighs the bad, but the bad *must* be part of the discussion.

The good: there are a lot of pervasive myths about stories that we've accepted as true that aren't. Some, like the lawlessness in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina or the true role of Woodward and Bernstein in

regards to Watergate, are well known to be myths to media watchers and historically literate people. Others, like Morrow's role with McCarthyism or Hearst's role in the Spanish-American War, are less so. The book does an excellent, if not straightforward and dry, job in detailing these.

The bad: there is a common theme in the myths that were chosen, and it was almost certainly ideological in nature. Either the myths perpetuate an anti-progressive point of view (Jessica Lynch, Katrina, etc) or the myths demonstrate the reality of the media not doing enough to promote that point of view (Bay of Pigs, McCarthy) and thus that being the criticism. It takes away from the criticism, not to mention significantly misses the point of the much of the problem with the media in the past as well as today.

It's definitely a worthwhile read. It just needs a little more nuance.

Ryan Holiday says

I read this book about six months ago and thought it was OK. It was only after I began to read a bit on this history of journalism and its role in US history that I began to see how pervasive these myths are. For instance, some of the most seminal books on media (The Media Monopoly by Ben Bagdikian which was the basis for much of Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent for instance) contain myths like Hearst's "you furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war" basis of theses. Others include Edward Morrow taking down McCarthy, the NYT suppressing the Bay of Pigs and "We lost Cronkite, we lost Middle America," all of which are not only stock anecdotes but in fact, the bedrock of most media criticism. Authors use them like filmmakers use well-known songs in nostalgia movies: instant, inarguable mood setters. But they are not true.

Van Reese says

I thought this was an interesting book about some of the more popular myths produced by the media. In most cases I don't think I would call it "fake news" since there is an element of truth. It isn't exactly made up, but it does involve some stretching of the truth or at least printing or broadcasting news without all the facts. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in news media or history since in some cases our perception of history is influenced by some of these myths.

Jen Well-Steered says

On the one hand, this book is reassuring, because it shows that 'fake news' and exaggeration are nothing new by taking apart stories from the past 100 years that have been the subject of sensationalist news reporting, and either showing that they were outright fabrications or that many aspects were overblown. On the other hand, it shows that journalism has nearly always favoured ratings over accuracy, and doesn't exactly give hope that the current situation will remedy itself.

Margaret Sankey says

Journalistic debunking of moments we have shaped into narratives with exaggerated importance--Hearst and

the "I'll furnish the war," War of the Worlds and widespread panic, Bra-burning in Atlantic City, Jessica Lynch, Crack Babies and Woodward and Bernstein singly-handedly bringing down Nixon, all of them pointing to a deep human need to take complicated, shaded situations and make them into stories that are easier to understand and fit our needs at the time.

Kayris says

Although this book was published in 2010, I first heard of it when it was mentioned in an article in the days following the Sandy Hook shootings in December. If you can recall, the wrong brother was initially identified as the shooter. The news media said the mother was a teacher at the school, then she was an aide, then a volunteer, then she had no ties to the school at all. The shooter was schizophrenic, autistic, bullied, you name it. It seemed like no one had the story right.

So I picked up this book with great anticipation. However, the truth turns out to be pretty dry. A least the way Campbell writes it. Maybe I had a hard time getting into it because the events that led to most of these myths happened long before I was born. In fact, the only ones of the first eight I had heard of were the War of the Worlds one and the bra burning one. I much enjoyed the final two chapters, on Jessica Lynch and Hurricane Katrina, much much more.

Fitting then, that I finished this book on the day that someone set off bombs at the Boston Marathon, and there is constant media coverage, but no one knows a whole lot of anything yet.

Stephen Gallup says

From an early age we are intrigued by opposites. The news media have the charter of disseminating reliable information. If they perform the opposite function, that should interest us.

Several reviewers say this book is dry. I actually found it quite readable, and am a little disturbed by their reaction. Popular myths become popular because a simple quote or concept is easily absorbed, remembered, and thereafter confidently repeated as fact. Somehow, equally simple rebuttals to those myths don't get traction. To substantiate the claim that an accepted truth is actually untrue, you need a certain amount of attention to detail, which is what this book provides. Yeah, some patience is involved (but I can think of books that require a lot more, this for example). For my own benefit, in case I need ready access to this later, high points follow:

There is *no evidence* that newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst ever told his illustrator in Cuba, "You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war" (i.e., the Spanish-American War). That outrageous claim was made by James Creelman, a "cigar-chomping correspondent who had a keen taste for hyperbole and a fondness for overstatement." He was in Europe at the time and had no connection to the people involved. Known facts concerning those people do not support it. Even so, his anecdote is generally accepted as evidence of the media's capacity to influence events, as opposed to just reporting on them. (I suspect it has inspired more recent journalists to do just that, or at least to try.)

The 1938 "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast actually *did not* convince multitudes that the Martians had landed. Newspaper reports of widespread panic seem to have been intended to undermine the credibility of

the new rival medium of radio. (Incidentally, at the time of the broadcast my father was a young adult living in Bound Brook, NJ, very close to the setting of the dramatized events. He spoke of being amused that his neighborhood was getting such notoriety, but not seeing any Martians outside his window he shrugged it off. As did everyone he knew.)

Edward R. Morrow *did not* single-handedly take down marauding Senator Joseph McCarthy. By the time his feature was aired in 1954, most people perceived that the anti-communist crusade had devolved into a witchhunt, and McCarthy's influence was plummeting. Had Morrow wanted to make a bold statement, he could have done so much earlier. Still, he became a convenient hero for a profession that was learning to lionize itself.

President Kennedy *did not* ask the *New York Times* to withhold a story about the upcoming Bay of Pigs invasion, nor did they. First of all, Kennedy was busily entertaining the British Prime Minister when the story came together and had no opportunity to hear about it. Secondly, the story did appear, on page one above the fold (albeit with insignificant deletions and a smaller headline based on the editor's judgment). Kennedy commented, ruefully, upon reading all the ensuing coverage, that Castro had no need for spies in the U.S.: all he had to do was read our papers. The myth is that spiking the story prevented its discussion and enabled the Kennedy Administration to proceed with what turned out to be a very bad idea. Instead, I suspect, advertising the planned invasion enabled Castro to thwart it all the more decisively.

Walter Cronkite's infamous quagmire news report of February 1968 *did not* convince LBJ that the Vietnam War was a lost cause. At the time that report was aired, Johnson was at a party, and there is no evidence that he ever saw it. His oft-quoted "If I've lost Cronkite …" line was probably never uttered. In the following days he continued to give very bellicose speeches about the necessity of prevailing in the conflict. It was weeks later, when meeting with his inner circle of advisors, that he began to perceive the inevitable. But even so, the war continued for several more years, so the notion that Cronkite effectively ended it with his newscast is a vain conceit.

In a small demonstration outside the Miss America Pageant in 1968 a few women did throw into a trash barrel various items they considered symbolic of female subjugation -- girdles, false eyelashes, even dishwashing detergent, and, yes, a bra or two. And an attempt was made to set the stuff on fire. It was a decidedly minor event, but with help from columnist Art Buchwald and others the alliterative but unwelcome term "bra burning" subsequently characterized the women's liberation movement.

Notwithstanding the well-timed book and movie indicating otherwise, two heroic newspaper reporters *did not* bring down Richard Nixon over the Watergate scandal. "What really happened … was, of course, vastly more complex." Decisive players included a federal judge (John Sirica), a bipartisan Senate investigating committee that uncovered the existence of Nixon's incriminating audiotapes, a special prosecutor who won release of those tapes, and the Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously that Nixon had to hand them over. Woodward and Bernstein did perform effective investigative journalism in the early months following the Watergate break-in. However, their inquiry took them only so far. By the time of Nixon's second inauguration they'd "run out of gas." Without involvement of the other players, Nixon would have completed his term.

Another unhelpful notion introduced to the popular culture by journalists was that women using crack cocaine during pregnancy were creating a "bio-underclass" of so-called crack babies. This was an overreaction to an isolated, speculative article in a medical journal. In due course, researchers established that "the adverse effects … turned out to be associated with a variety of factors [including] the quality of the newborn's environment." However, journalists were less eager to acknowledge the error. The book

presents this story as an example of "a tendency among journalists to neglect or disregard the tentativeness that characterizes serious scientific research." There is far more appeal in reporting an apocalypse, even if it's theoretical.

The final two stories are also instances of hurried and sloppy reporting. In the 2003 Iraq invasion, a convoy of American military vehicles made a wrong turn and came under attack. According to monitored enemy radio transmissions, one American soldier, described as blonde, fought heroically to enable the rest to escape. The only blonde known to be in that company was Private Jessica Lynch, who was captured by the Iraqis. She was then extracted in a highly-publicized rescue mission; and, despite her protestations that she hadn't fired a shot, she was hailed in the press as the war's first hero. Eventually, it was learned that the actual blonde in question had been Sergeant Donald Walters, who was captured and executed. To this day, Lynch remains the hero and Walters remains unknown.

Likewise, when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, journalists descending on New Orleans had only a sketchy understanding of the situation. Excitable residents passed along rumors suggesting a nightmarish collapse of all civilized norms: People were being murdered and raped right and left, sharks and alligators were swimming in flooded streets, etc. All this was duly reported to an incredulous world (with consequences such as discouraging truckers with relief supplies from entering the city, thereby prolonging everyone's misery). Almost none of it was true. Once again, little effort was ever expended in correcting the story.

The author predicts that the media will generate additional "delicious tales, easy to remember, and perhaps self-congratulatory." I think the tales he has recorded here represent less than the tip of the iceberg. As far as I can tell, news reporting is mostly about advancing narratives that bear little resemblance to the real story, often for the purpose of altering public perception, affecting the way people vote, etc. (interesting observations here). I'm glad to read here that 20% of American adults ignore the news on any given day. Of course, included in that number are the numbskulls we enjoy seeing in on-the-street interviews -- folks who can't name the Vice President and don't know who we fought in the Revolutionary War. But plenty of informed people (myself included) have learned to avoid mainstream news altogether.

The media emphatically do have the capacity to create myths. Whether they ultimately succeed in altering the course of history is the question before us.

Kate says

The problem with the truth is that it is dry like an overcooked Thanksgiving turkey compared to the perfectly brined meat product of "telling anecdote." I found this book sustaining and informative but in need of some cranberry sauce.

The best chapter was the one on Edward R. Murrow and Senator McCarthy.

The one I picked the book for, the story someone needs to tell in a way that people listen, is the one about Hurricane Katrina. Well, whoever writes that at least has his or her research already done here.

Still, I wish this were an annual series - a "Worst Media Reporting" companion to "Best Crime Reporting" or "Best Spiritual Writing" collections that come out each year.

Daniel DeLappe says

Great book. This should be read by anyone who reads the news. Learn something about stats after reading this book and it becomes scary how full of shit most news is today and in the past.

Martha says

This one didn't impress me as much as I'd expected. I thought the chapter on Hurricane Katrina was the best of them. Others, it seemed that the writer was talking about psychology and putting more black and white into gray areas. Opinions stated as fact. He could have used an editor, too.

Muhammad Imran says

This book is an account of how different biases and pressures shape what passes as authentic journalism in the West - which is deemed the leader of freedom of press.

Tommy Powell says

An excellent nightstand read for those who feel frustrated with the current state of journalism. Campbell -a journalism professor at American University- gives the background on each story and then dissects the available information, much of it known at the time the story evolved into myth. For instance, the "Panic" created by the War of the Worlds broadcast in 1938 never happened. Campbell then goes into the details of local news coverage in New York and Newark, and the heavy reliance on the wire services -which were in the habit of simply redistributing the news from New York.
One other instance is well worth mentioning. A few years after Hurricane Katrina a few media outlets covered -very, very briefly- the uniformity of hysteria presented by all media outlets. He has a wonderful quote from Major Ed Bush of the Louisiana National Guard, who was stationed at the Super Dome during most of the immediate aftermath, 'People [here:] would hear something on their radios and come to me saying that children were being raped in the bathroom, or that someone had been murdered and I would have to say "Ma'am, where?" "... if there were bodies my men would find them. Everybody heard, nobody saw.'

Anthony says

Actually surprised how much I liked this book. Not a fan of the media in general, but was concerned about his last two chapters on Jessica Lynch and Katrina, but after reading them I have to agree with his assessments on both.
