Daily News, Eternal Stories

The Mythological Role of Journalism

by JACK LULE

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THE GUILFORD PRESS
New York London

A Division of Guilford Publications, Inc.
72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012
www.guilford.com

Printed in the United States of America

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Last digit is print number: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lule, Jack, 1954–
Daily news, eternal stories : the mythological role of journalism / Jack Lule.
p. cm. — (The Guilford communication series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-57230-608-4 (hardcover) — ISBN 1-57230-606-8 (pbk.)
1. Journalism and literature. 2. Journalism—Social aspects.
3. Mythology in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PN4759 .L85 2001
070.4′3′01—dc21

00-049498

To Mom and Dad;
John, Nick, and Joe; and Gregorie

Acknowledgments

I am not the kind of person who quotes Shakespeare often. But I remember this scene well. Hamlet has entered morosely, head down, paper in hand—"the poor wretch comes reading." Polonious asks him, "What do you read, my lord?" Hamlet's answer: "Words, words, words."

I don't know why the line stays with me. But I do know that I've spent much of my time trying to understand the timeless and enduring power of what are really only . . . words.

Many words—spoken and written, said and unsaid—have shaped me and this book. Friends and colleagues at Temple University, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the University of Georgia first helped forge these thoughts. At Georgia, Al Hester and Jim Carey, who fortuitously was visiting for a semester, offered early direction. Though we worked together later, I first met John Pauly at Georgia, and have always benefited from his thinking.

I never thought I would acknowledge academic organizations. But the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, especially the Qualitative Studies division, put me in touch with many good people, especially Richard Campbell and Ted Glasser. The International Communication Association and National Communication Association gave me forums to pursue these ideas. Most of the case studies were originally published, in different form, in organization journals, including *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, and the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. Those publi-

cations also led to my connection with Peter Wissoker and the good people at The Guilford Press.

My home for the last 10 years, Lehigh University, has been remarkably encouraging. The administration, faculty, and staff have supported me personally and professionally. Students have become friends—and teachers.

Long before all this, however, friendships formed from kindergarten through college shaped me in deeper ways. My family, including the Lalor family, which I married into, keeps me rooted in the world outside the university. My mother and father, especially, provided me with models of happiness and hard work. My wife, Gregorie, and three sons, John, Nick, and Joe, became the reasons in a life that had many reasons. These words are for them.

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Story 1: Elders of the Choctaw tribe of North America told of a time when total darkness covered the earth. Tribal leaders searched endlessly for daylight. Finally, light was seen coming from the north. The tribe rejoiced, but a few wise families understood danger could be found in the light as well as in the dark. These families built themselves a vast raft while the rest of the tribe dismissed the possible danger as they waited for the light to arrive. Then a great roar resounded. The light was revealed to be the headwaters of a huge flood that carried off the tribe, except for the wise families on the raft, who survived to create the tribe anew.

Story 2: Chief priests of the Inca taught their people about the disaster of the Pachachama era. It was a time of corruption and barbarity. Only two humble shepherds and their families remained true to their gods. One day, the shepherds were warned by llamas that a great flood was approaching. The shepherds and their families sought refuge on the highest mountain. They watched as the world below was subsumed beneath roiling waters.

Story 3: Genesis tells the story of Noah and the ark. The Lord saw that wickedness and corruption was great on the earth. But Noah, a good man, found favor with the Lord. The Lord told Noah to build an ark and to fill the ark with living things. Then the floodgates of the sky were opened and rain fell upon the earth for 40 days and 40 nights. Only Noah, his family, and the animals in the ark survived.

Story 4: The *New York Times* told of the devastation of Central America in 1998. Immense poverty plagued many nations. Impoverished people erected poorly built homes dangerously close to rivers or precariously perched on mountain slopes—areas forsaken by the wealthier classes and corporations. The nations' leaders looked away. A hurricane came from the east. Rain fell for days. Floods and great mountains of mud swept away entire villages. Thousands of people died. The scene was a vision out of Dante, a deluge of biblical proportions, the *Times* reported. "It's a punishment from God," said an elderly Honduran carpenter on the front page of the *Times*.[1]

The four stories summarized above are, in many ways, the same story. Tales of the great flood have been told in countless societies. The tales have a remarkable similarity across centuries, continents, and cultures. They are stories of birth and renewal, death and apocalypse. They portray people who have done grave wrong, people who have sinned against their gods, people who have strayed from the right path. They depict gods or fabulous forces of nature that punish and purify. They culminate, always, with the same image: the devastating, humbling, cleansing waters that sweep away a people.[2]

The flood tale is just one of humankind's *eternal stories*, the age-old myths and ageless archetypes that have chastened, challenged, entertained, entranced, and instructed people since people first were. Those stories were told around prehistoric campfires, in ancient Greek dramas, in epic Roman poems, in Hindu verses, in native American myths—and are still told today, in the news.

Our society calls the flood stories told by ancient societies "myth." Our society calls the flood story told by the *New York Times* "news." This book is about connections between myth and news. It suggests that similarities between flood myths and news stories are one example of a much larger phenomenon. It suggests that ancient myths have taken modern form on the front page.

In fact, I will argue that archetypal myths can be found every day within national reports, international correspondence, sports columns, human interest features, editorials, and obituaries. I will suggest that any discussion of journalism that does not account for storytelling and myth will miss a vital part of the news. Because this argument might seem curious, I will identify seven master myths and, through case studies of the *New York Times*, I will attempt to demonstrate how these myths take shape in the stories of news.

THE NEWS STORY

The news *story*: We run the words together so often that their meaning gets lost. News comes to us as a *story*, the telling of a happening, the dictionary says, written or spoken with the intention of entertaining or informing. Journalists are part of a long storytelling tradition that includes fleet-footed messengers, minstrels, troubadours, carriers, couriers, criers, poets, chief priests, missionaries, rabbis, and medicine men. They draw their tales from a deep but nonetheless limited body of story forms and types that long ago proved their ability to hold audiences. The storytelling tradition is significant, probably even crucial—as we will see—to human lives and human societies.

We don't often think of news in this way. Our understanding of news is shaped by our times. We act as if news was invented for our modern era. We think of news as information for an information society. News, for us, is details and data about politics, products, crime, celebrities, technology, sports, and stocks. News gives us reports about candidates, companies, teams, movies, school boards, neighbors, and the weather.

Our understanding of news is also shaped by where we live. We act as if news was invented in the United States for U.S. democracy. We think of news as enshrined in the First Amendment, created by Jefferson, Madison, and the other framers of the Constitution for the proper instruction of an informed public. News, for us, is crucial to the smooth functioning of democratic life. Without journalism, there is no democracy, writers say. And without democracy, there is no journalism.[3]

Seen as enduring, abiding stories, news can be understood in different, though not incompatible, ways than now is common. Eternal stories do convey information. Eternal stories can be useful for democratic life. For example, the flood tale often assigns blame to a people. Was the *New*

York Times suggesting that Central American people and governments were being *punished* by the flood? An emphasis on stories helps us think about news in different ways. We ask different questions. We get different answers. We arrive at a new understanding of news.

That's good. We are in desperate need of a new understanding. No doubt: News—the reporter of world crises—is in crisis. Critical issues face journalism. The issues are many and actually have achieved a kind of urgency in our times. People express immense dissatisfaction, even cynical disgust, with the news. They detest the arrogant attitude of reporters and broadcasters, as well as the dispiriting negativity in much coverage. They deplore its sensationalism, tawdry gossip, and lack of fairness. They charge that serious subjects, such as education, health, and hunger, are ignored for tabloid drama, such as celebrity trials and the sex lives of politicians.[4]

Of great concern: The very role of news in our society is increasingly being called into question. Surveys show that people think the news media *hinder* rather than help the country. A majority of people say they do not trust the news media. Indeed, even journalists don't trust their fellow journalists. Surveys place journalists far down on the list of trustworthy professionals, a depth once associated with used car dealers, snake-oil salesmen, and pornographers—a far cry from poets and chief priests.[5]

Journalists and scholars have proved adept at identifying the news crisis but have been less adept at suggesting solutions. They try to refine campaign coverage. They swear to forsake sensationalism. They work to improve relationships with the public. Almost monthly, books and essays appear that seek to restore the role of news in democratic life.[6] These efforts are good and much needed. But they are destined to fall short unless they address the human hunger and need for stories.

Storytelling will never be in crisis (even if individual storytellers are) because storytelling is an essential part of what makes us human. We understand our lives and our world through story. Perhaps stories are so much a part of us because human life itself has the structure of story. Each of us has a central character. Each of us knows, better than we know anything, that life has a beginning, middle, and end. We *need* stories because we *are* stories.[7] Stories will stop, it is clear, only when humanity stops.

News? The outlook is not so deathless. In our time, we have embraced the notion of news as information. We deprecate storytelling. And now news has become less valuable, less central. News will survive if we truly recognize the significance and implications of storytelling. News

will be in crisis to the extent that we ignore the roots of journalists as storytellers.

THE LANGUAGE OF NEWS

This book could pursue its goals in a number of ways. To study news as story and myth, many research methods could be employed. Interviews could be undertaken with reporters and editors. Surveys could be conducted of journalists and of the public. Scholars of myth could be asked to offer historical comparisons. Opinions of people in power could be sought. Scholars have employed all these approaches in studies of the news.

But, for me, the most direct way to study news is to analyze the articles themselves as illustrations of myth. My primary focus is the words, the language, of news. Ultimately, what is really at stake—for presidential candidates and protest groups, for princesses and terrorists, for heavyweight boxers and inner-city neighborhoods—is what the news *said*. The language of news is what matters. Readers—even journalists themselves—often don't have the time to really concentrate on the words of news, to fully understand *what is being said*, to probe all the possible meanings and implications of the language. Yet the news, as Hamlet told Polonious, is "words, words, words."

Where shall we find the words to study seven master myths in the news? The evidence for this perhaps unconventional argument will be taken from case studies of journalism. Case studies are a proven means of research in many fields. Rather than contemplate abstract principles of business, law, medicine, or journalism, research focuses on a particular incident, a case, that illustrates principles at work. Harvard Business School, for example, has long prided itself on teaching its subject through detailed case studies. In journalism, case studies often concentrate on news coverage of particular individuals or events—story by story, word by word.

Case studies can be a valuable tool. Sometimes issues are so large and so complex that abstract discussions founder on endless possibilities. For example, one could write—and I have—long and interminable treatises on news coverage of terrorism. The issues are large: What has been the news media's role in modern terrorism? How should the news report acts of terror? To what extent should the media cover victims of terrorism? The list of questions can go on. But the discussion of issues gets much more spe-

cific—and often much more worthwhile—by dramatically narrowing the focus and considering, for example, coverage of one incident by one newspaper: the terrorist killing of Leon Klinghoffer aboard the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship as reported by the *New York Times*. The issues remain the same but now the discussion is grounded, real, specific.

Cases might be drawn from various media, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, the weekly news magazines, CNN, the evening news broadcasts, or even high-quality local news outlets. But more than any other U.S. news medium, the *New York Times* has become crucial reading for those interested in the news, national politics, and international affairs.

Understanding the *Times* has become a necessary part of understanding the times. Though not the biggest, it may well be the most significant newspaper in the world, "the last great newspaper."[8] Evidence of the *Times*'s influence is clear to the careful observer.[9] Studies confirm the influence of the *Times* in the White House, Congress, State Department, and Pentagon.[10] Some critics even charge that the *Times* serves as an instrument of the State Department and U.S. foreign policy. On the other hand, foreign dictators and prime ministers too strive to give information to—or hide information from—*Times* correspondents.[11]

People in the news media also acknowledge the importance of the *Times*. The newspaper has been awarded dozens of Pulitzer Prizes, far more than any other news organization. Rival newspaper editors and broadcast news directors make the *Times* required reading for their staffs so that the *Times* helps set an agenda for other news media.[12] Conversely, media commentators devote much time and space to critical examinations and heated excoriations of *Times* reporting. Right-wing commentator Rush Limbaugh and left-wing columnist Alexander Cockburn may share only one belief: The *Times* is dangerous to U.S. politics.

The stories are no more true—they may be more false—because of this relationship with privilege and power. But for critics and admirers, the *Times* has long been recognized as a key to understanding U.S. and world affairs.

THE STATE SCRIBE

For these reasons, the *Times* offers a premier site for case studies of news as myth. In many ways, the *Times* has the status and privilege accorded mythic storytellers of the past. For example, Homer was the leading scribe

of his times. Elite and influential, he enjoyed access to the powerful and privileged. He produced knowing accounts of political intrigue, military conquest, personal struggles, and heroic triumphs. His words and works shaped the writings of others. The *Times* can be understood in similar terms. The *Times* can be seen as a State Scribe, as our society's privileged and preeminent storyteller. The *Times* is the connected insider, serene with position and power, flattering the mighty but also sometimes threatening them because of its status.

Such social, political, and economic success will prove to have large implications for *Times* journalism—and for my study of news as myth. Can the State Scribe and other national and local news media—now inextricably a part of the social, political, and economic system—really be expected to invest heavily in stories that confront this system? Can *Times* reporters and editors be expected to question a structure in which they and their newspaper have risen to the top ranks of power, prestige, and compensation? Can the State Scribe really write too far from the state?

These are the kinds of questions that arise from serious reflections on news as myth. Thankfully, we are not setting off over completely unexplored ground. Other writers too have considered news in mythic terms. Studies have come from an eclectic group of scholars, from French writer Roland Barthes to Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan.[13] Myth became an important concept in U.S. and British cultural studies during the 1970s and 1980s. Researchers adopted myth to study news coverage of politics, terrorism, assassinations, labor disputes, social movements, South African elections, presidential addresses, the *Titanic,* modern films, and other topics.[14] They argued that, consciously or unconsciously, journalists cast modern experience in terms of myth.

The research was highly suggestive. But the research mostly has stalled. Writers in the academy have moved on to other topics. Though the early work still makes bibliographical appearances, comparisons of news and myth are mostly cited and recited as research relics. With some notable exceptions, few recent works have appeared.[15] But I think we will find that myth lives on in the news, that news—perhaps now more than ever—needs to be understood as myth. The comparison at first might seem odd or strange. But I hope to show that the daily news brings eternal stories, that news is the true heir to humankind's myths, and that news—as myth—deserves critical attention and consideration.

Part I

The Story of the News Story