

I will also emphasize that these individual cases represent many others. The sacrifice of victims, exemplified in *New York Times* reporting on a terrorist victim, can be found in local and national reports of accidents, crashes, and other tragedies. The degrading of a Scapegoat, exemplified in news reporting about Black Panther Huey Newton, can be found in numerous reports of people outside the political mainstream. Myths appear daily in the news. Like a plodding, laconic lawyer, slowly building a case for a jury, I hope to submit exhibit after exhibit until the verdict is inescapable: Our modern society would like to think it has no need of myth, but the great stories of myth are told and retold daily in the news.

My emphasis obviously will be on *stories*. We will be drawing connections among stories that span human history. We will try to understand the constructive and corrosive implications of these stories. Though we use the words easily, we don't often consider the cultural and political significance of the *news story*. But it is through story, the subject of the next chapter, that news becomes myth.

Chapter 2

The Mythological Role of Journalism

Stories for Society

In 1980, musician Bruce Springsteen was atop the world of rock 'n' roll. He was no overnight success. For years, he and his band had bounced through the bars of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania until a series of albums in the 1970s earned him true rock-star status. To solidify that status, Springsteen began a world tour designed to coincide with the release of his album *The River*. As a concluding note to the U.S. leg of the tour, Springsteen would return to Philadelphia, not far from his Jersey roots and a place where he had long been a major attraction. He sold out the Spectrum, an 18,000-seat arena, for three straight nights.

News stories often are formed from many complex sociological and political factors. This story was not.

An editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* called me to his desk.

He asked if I had ever heard of "Bruce Springboard." He said that.

I corrected him.

"Whatever," he said. "He sold out the Spectrum for three nights. No one does that. We should do a story," he said.

"Actually, there's more," I said. "He comes from Jersey. Philadelphia helped give him a start. The local bars hired him. The local radio stations played his songs."

"That's even better," the editor said. "A local angle. Do it."

From this in-depth, philosophical consultation, the news story first took shape. Other consultations followed. The story on Springsteen was to run on the cover of the Sunday magazine in the midst of his sold-out performances. I needed to interview him on the tour before he got to Philadelphia. I flew out to Denver and viewed one of his legendary four-hour shows that left him and his audiences exhausted and soaked with sweat. I found my way backstage. Springsteen was giving quick, helpful interviews to local reporters scrambling to meet deadlines after the long show. Within a half hour, I was the only reporter left.

Springsteen looked at me quizzically. Why was I still there? What did I need? He was being open and generous and wanted to help. I explained. I gave him an idea of "the story." I wanted to talk about Philadelphia and the early days and the triumphal homecoming at the end of the tour. He nodded enthusiastically. Now he too understood "the story." With Springsteen's assistance, my story on the "local hero" ran during his homecoming.¹

GETTING THE STORY—FROM STORY

News stories do not arrive fully formed on the dusty computer screens of journalists, though journalists sometimes wish they would. Stories are shaped by many forces. The process begins early. Even as the story is assigned, such as with my Springsteen story, editors and reporters make sure they have a mutual understanding of "the story."

Other forces too then begin to act on the story. Colleagues may suggest their own interpretations. The publisher may have expectations, well known in the newsroom. Previous stories found in databases or clippings files sometimes exert an influence. Conventions and traditions guide research and writing, such as codes of objectivity and inverted pyramid leads, which place the last and most important part of the story first. Sources have their own views of the story. Questions asked by competing reporters are noted. The expectations of the audience and even long-term circulation goals can have an impact.

The single news story can be forged from some or all of these forces.

Stories, in this perspective, take shape before a word is written. For each event—a homecoming, congressional battle, fire, baseball game, or concert—editors, reporters, sources, and audiences try to understand "*what's the story.*"

Yet for each event, editors and writers do not have to conceive of brand-new stories. They do not have to tell stories never before written or read. "There are no new stories under the sun," an editor was fond of telling me. Stories already exist. Journalists approach events with stories already in mind. They employ common understandings. They borrow from shared narratives. They draw upon familiar story forms. They come to the news story *with* stories. Sometimes the story changes as the journalist gathers more information. But the story doesn't change into something completely new and never before seen. The story changes into . . . another story. What are these stories? We can call them *fundamental stories* or *eternal stories*. They shape the work of editors and reporters every day.

FUNDAMENTAL STORIES

As I noted, *storytelling* seems fundamental to human life. Every people have left evidence of storytelling. Humans make sense of the world and their time in it through story. Even more intriguing, *some stories* appear fundamental to human life. Startlingly similar folktales, legends, and myths can be found in different cultures and eras.

For example, the folklorist Stith Thompson worked for much of the twentieth century on a wonderfully convoluted, stunningly byzantine, multivolume index of folk literature. It began with a compilation of the world's myths. Year after year, Thompson collected, collated, and catalogued thousands of myths from across centuries and cultures. Thompson did not organize the myths by country, culture, or time period. Instead, he organized the myths by *theme*. In other words, Thompson looked across hundreds of years and thousands of cultures and found—the same stories.²

How does that happen? Some anthropologists are convinced that direct connections among these stories can be traced. They argue that neighboring societies borrowed ideas, custom, tools, recipes, and stories from one another. They point out that great cultural centers of the ancient world were often great trading centers. Stories, they say, were traded too. Stories became part of an overall process of cultural diffusion.³

Early psychiatrists and psychologists also observed fundamental sto-

ries. However, they advanced a different reason for their widespread occurrence. Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, in particular, noted similarities between stories, folktales, myths—and dreams. They asked: How could a seven-year-old girl, an unlikely candidate for diffusion, have dreams with plots and symbols taken from ancient stories? Jung was especially intrigued. He was, for a while, Freud's foremost student and colleague. When he broke with Freud, one of his primary interests became the study of the "collective unconscious." Jung pointed out that humans were born with bodily organs that had long evolutionary histories. He believed that the human mind too had its own long evolutionary history. This collective unconscious, Jung said, contains powerful, primordial patterns—archetypes—that lead to the creation of universal symbols, characters, motifs, stories, and myths.⁴

Definitive answers about fundamental stories are not likely to be established by the anthropologists or the psychologists. Perhaps the best answer combines the two. Some stories may be fundamental to humans, and are probably based on the shared experiences of being human. People are born into an almost infinite variety of circumstances. Yet we all still share some experiences. We share birth, the entry into the world as small and helpless babies. We share infancy and have hazy, half-remembered images from childhood. We typically have families or relationships with mother figures and father figures. We share feelings of fear, love, hate, anger, compassion, jealousy, and joy. We share bodily, natural sensations of hunger, thirst, and sexual desire. We need to sleep. We need to move. We produce and understand, tell and retell, stories based on these experiences. And these stories sometimes have been, and will be, shared and spread.

These fundamental stories can be understood as "archetypes." As we noted, the word can be used in its original, broader meaning without the Jungian theory. *Archetypes* are original figures or frameworks, powerful patterns, models to imitate and adapt. The fundamental stories of humankind are archetypal stories. They are patterns and models, born from human experience, to imitate and adapt. The Flood that destroys and cleanses human society is an archetypal story adapted by hundreds of cultures. The Trickster, that half-animal, half-human figure lurching through society, is an archetypal story. The Hero is an archetypal story.

Once the fundamental stories are in place, they cast their influence on storytelling. Stories shape storytelling. As writers and societies attempt to understand and express their experience of the world, they consciously and unconsciously draw upon the special stories, the commonly shared,

universally understood stock of archetypal stories. Writers find these stories within themselves and within their societies. A person may never have been told or taught the story of the Flood. But the person has experiences: with the unpredictable forces of nature, or with driving rain and wild winds, or with sensations of being submerged in a bath, pool, lake, or ocean. And the person can be led by those experiences to understand, and perhaps to tell, the story of the Flood. Born from universally understood archetypal stories, the particular telling of these tales can have great emotional impact on listeners in every time—including today.

NEWS: THE LATEST ECHO

News stories can be understood as the modern recurrence of these stories. Society after society has attested to the enduring power of the archetypal stories. Our society is no different. News is the latest echo of stories uttered long ago. Journalists, as storytellers, cannot help but call upon the fundamental stories.

Other writers have noted fundamental stories in the news. The historian Robert Darnton spent some formative years reporting for the *New York Times*. Only after his days in the newsroom did he appreciate the power of story. He left journalism and had undertaken research in early popular culture. He noted with wonder the "striking resemblance" between modern news stories and early English chapbooks, broadside ballads, and other historical stories. He noted that, "all purvey the same motifs, which also appear in children's literature and probably derive from ancient oral traditions." He continued:

Of course we did not suspect that cultural determinants were shaping the way we wrote about crimes in Newark, but we did not sit down at our typewriters with our minds a *tabula rasa*. Because of our tendency to see immediate events rather than long-term processes, we were blind to the archaic element in journalism. But our very conception of "news" resulted from ancient ways of telling "stories."⁵

Darnton, somewhat defensively, rejected the idea that "primitive" myth might be at work. "Of course it would be absurd to suggest that newsmen's fantasies are haunted by primitive myths of the sort imagined by Jung and Lévi-Strauss," he said. But, absurdly enough, Darnton

seemed to suggest precisely that. "Big stores develop in special patterns and have an archaic flavor," he said, "as if they were metamorphoses of *Ur*-stories that have been lost in the depths of time."⁶

Thoughtful scholars of mass media also have perceived the influence of story on news. David Eason has emphasized the distinction between events and "the possible forms which the story of that event may take within culturally provided categories."⁷ S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne suggest that "six crime reporters who leave the courtroom with the same story may be writing about reality, but their 'story' emerges as much from the stories that have gone before as from the facts of the case in court."⁸ Michael Schudson also placed special emphasis on stories in news. Writing about conventions of twentieth-century U.S. journalism, he said:

I will suggest that the power of the media lies not only (and not even primarily) in its power to declare things to be true, but in its power to provide the forms in which the declarations appear. News in a newspaper or on television has a relationship to the "real world," not only in content but in form; that is, in the way the world is incorporated into unquestioned and unnoticed conventions of narration, and then transfigured, no longer a subject for discussion but a premise of any conversation at all.⁹

Other scholars have gone further and identified specific motifs and plots that recur in the news. Herbert Gans identified "enduring values" that shape news stories, such as altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, and individualism.¹⁰ Richard Campbell argued that one large, Middle American myth of individualism guided the television newsmagazine *60 Minutes* each week.¹¹ My identification of seven master myths in the news attempts to add to this tradition.

For now, I think it is important to understand that "the story" is an underappreciated yet essential part of creating and understanding the news. Stories make news easier. Stories make news *possible*. Without stories, editors, reporters, and their sources might find it impossible to recognize news amid thousands of daily events. Without stories, reporters might find it difficult to produce news under intense deadlines and competitive pressures. Without stories, editors might find it hard to prioritize and select items for the front page—the "top story" of the day.

The influence of the story does not stop there. Stories make news possible for readers and viewers. Individual readers approach the story armed

with stories. Readers decide for themselves "what's the story." And readers bring their own personalities, prejudices, and predilections to the story. The reader can nod and smile at the writer's wisdom. The reader can curse and reject the writer's version of events. The reader can understand the story in precisely the opposite way that the writer intended. Or the reader can completely ignore the entire thing and decide there is no story here. On city buses, I've watched readers pull out the part of the newspaper that contained my story on the section's front page—and discard the entire section to the dirty, puddle-strewn floor of the bus. The story was not even worth carrying around. Stories thus, in some way, come first and last. Story has continually shaped the story.

STORIES FOR SOCIETY: NEWS BECOMES MYTH

Every telling of the fundamental stories does not result in myth, however. Stories have their own status. Some stories are important just for individuals or for small groups. If one of my children runs into the house crying, I will ask what happened to him. And my child will put events into a story of the tragedy. That story is important to me and to my child but probably not terribly important to society at large. Other stories, though, are meaningful and consequential for many people.

Just as storytelling seems fundamental to *human* life, storytelling seems fundamental to *social* life. Humans need stories—and their societies need stories. Through stories, a group of people define themselves. They tell stories of their origins. They tell stories of what they believe and what they do not believe. They tell stories of evildoers who threaten the group. They tell stories that ostracize some and celebrate others. They draw from the archetypal stories to pass onto their children and their children's children their ways of life, love, worship, and work. These societal stories attain sacred status. They become accepted and their value becomes assumed. They narrate and illustrate shared beliefs, values, and ideals. They are myths.

And here we can achieve some understanding of how news becomes myth. We have seen that fundamental stories shape storytelling, that editors, reporters, sources, and readers consciously and unconsciously draw upon the universally understood stock of archetypal stories. When these fundamental stories become *public*, when these stories are told to a people, when these stories are narrated on a societal level to render exemplary

models and represent shared social values and beliefs, news becomes myth.

NEWS, MYTH, AND SOCIETY

Comparisons of news and myth are thus important not for *literary* implications but for *social* implications. The crucial relationship between a society and its myths is made clear in a famous quotation from Bronislaw Malinowski. An anthropologist, Malinowski approached myth differently from Eliade and others I have considered. He emphasized the functions of myth in "primitive" cultures. He believed myth was primarily a "social charter" for such societies. Many scholars have found fault with Malinowski's politics. But they still love the breadth of this quotation, which attempts to make plain the importance of myth for humanity. Malinowski wrote:

Studied alive, myth, as we shall see, is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hardworked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.¹²

It may seem strange, but I can examine each affirmation from that classic conception of myth and see news in every one. Those affirmations, for me, point to the large social possibilities and responsibilities that open up from serious consideration of news as myth. To suggest that news is myth calls for more than an appreciation of reoccurring stories. Myth has been a "vital ingredient of human civilization." Myth has been a "hardworked active force." How and why does that force get used? In concrete terms: Which myths get told and why? This is not a small question. It takes us directly into the tangle of news, ideology, rules, politics, charters, order, and society.

Since the early 1900s, journalists and scholars have striven to under-

stand the societal role of U.S. news. One clear finding has emerged: No one clear finding will emerge. The role of news has proved to be an especially subtle, complex subject. Yet to advance a discussion of news as myth for our society, myth will need to find a place. At least six models, some conflicting, for exploring the role of news in U.S. society have been identified.

1. *To watch over government.* The news serves as a "necessary guardian," a watchdog, over government. Building upon the thoughts of Madison and Jefferson, writers have argued that an essential role of news in society is to keep a watchful eye on those in power. As a "fourth estate" alongside the three branches of government, the press makes sure the interests of the people are safeguarded.

2. *To manufacture consent.* In contradicting the previous model, other writers have argued that the news has served to maintain established ideology. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, for example, suggest that U.S. news, rather than observing government and informing the public, is used by the government for manufacturing consent of the public.¹³

3. *To set the public agenda.* For other writers, a primary role of news is to serve as a "gatekeeper" for events, issues, and ideas. Building on gate-keeping insights, other researchers have examined the agenda-setting role of news, its ability to order and organize social issues for the public.¹⁴ The news, they say, might not be able to tell people what to think but it does tell people what to think *about*.

4. *To inform public opinion.* The news serves mostly to inform and educate the public, other writers suggest, so that citizens can make responsible decisions. More strongly, many writers are convinced that mass communication, including the news, has powerful *effects* on people.¹⁵ These models declare that news stories transmit attitudes, opinions, or information to people.

5. *To foster public conversation.* John Dewey argued that public opinion cannot be conceived in terms of correct or incorrect ideas, right or wrong information.¹⁶ He and others saw public opinion as an ongoing conversation of issues and concerns. And they saw news not as information, correct or incorrect, but as part of the conversation and sometimes as a site for the conversation.¹⁷

6. *To enact social dramas.* None of the previous models for news—even taken together—grasp fully my own experiences of writing and reading the news *story*. None capture the possibilities of news as myth. They

see news primarily involved with political beliefs, opinions, and decisions. The models shed little light on nonpolitical (yet socially significant) stories about floods and fires, saints and princesses, home-run heroes and murdered neighbors—the stuff that makes up most news.

Kenneth Burke has advanced a different, especially spacious approach. Burke was a wide-ranging thinker writing in the middle of the twentieth century, a literary critic and social commentator, a maddening writer of genius who seemed to see connections between all kinds of stories, dramas, and social life.¹⁸ His model starts from basic premises. First, “society” is an ambiguous, imprecise term. Instead, one can talk more accurately about “social order,” that is, how a particular society is organized and kept together. *Social order* is the specific structure of all the things that make up a society: rights, authority, power, hierarchy, status, ways of worship, labor, property relations, means of production, means of having fun. Social order provides a way to talk about a particular society at a particular time.

Though the model emphasizes *order*, social order is not some kind of fixed, unmoving system. Social order is literally acted out each day in “social dramas,” large and small. Social dramas are the large and small acts and interactions that make up life. They are written and spoken, official and unofficial, formal and informal—from congressional hearings to parent-teacher conferences. Social dramas give life to social order each day.

News stories fit easily in the model.¹⁹ Life and social order are understood in terms of drama. And news—a kind of daily dramatist—enlarges, extends, and enhances these dramas. In this model, a primary role of news is to enact social dramas that *sustain social order*.

WHICH MYTHS GET TOLD AND WHY

To sum up the matter perhaps too simply: Reporters, editors, sources, and readers draw from a large, though limited, range of fundamental stories to portray and understand events. Which stories ultimately get chosen? Which myths get told in the news and why? *News most often tells stories that support and sustain the current state of things.*

This model does not conceive of news, myth, and social order in narrow political terms. With each passing election, news coverage doesn't support social order by simply shifting support to whatever political party is in power. Social order is more deeply entrenched. For example, U.S.

news stories may aggressively criticize abusive judges. But stories will seldom question the judicial system. Likewise, news stories will take differing perspectives on the particular economic policies of either party. But the stories will accept, even assume, the free market system.

There's room for change, though, in the model of social drama. Social order is dynamic and flexible, acted out each day. The world is not fixed in place. Social dramas sometimes can be used to challenge and even change social order. Great social dramas have brought change to women's rights, civil rights, and other parts of society. And news has participated in these dramas. News can sometimes foster fundamental change. But not often.

The links between news, myth, and society thus will make for intriguing study. But, again, I don't want to overreach. I don't want to completely negate other, traditional models for thinking about news. News has many political, social, cultural, and economic roles. But in carrying out these roles, *news tells stories*. And those stories, drawing from myth, often shape and maintain social order.

I want foremost to keep an appreciative sense of wonder for this perhaps jarring juxtaposition of daily news and timeless stories. I want to explore the ways in which myth takes modern form in a news story. I want to understand some of the rich political, cultural, and social implications of news as myth. I want to comprehend some of the troubling consequences. It is humbling to consider that some stories have engaged and enthralled humans throughout existence, that people of the twenty-first century share stories of the human experience with people of the first century. I want finally to appreciate that in our modern, high-tech, online world, we find stories and practices that date back to tribal times.

In *The Educated Imagination*, the literary critic Northrop Frye, drawing upon Aristotle, tried to make clear the role of the poet in society. He contrasted the poet with the historian. He wrote:

The historian makes specific and particular statements, such as: “The battle of Hastings was fought in 1066.” Consequently he's judged by the truth or falsehood of what he says—either there was such a battle or there wasn't, and if there was he's got the date either right or wrong. But the poet, Aristotle says, never makes any real statements at all, certainly no particular or specific ones. The poet's job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens: not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place.²⁰

The thought may be a bit inflated. But I think the journalist, through myth, can ultimately fulfill the social role of historian and poet. The journalist, at best, can get the date right *and* the meaning right. The journalist, at best, can tell you not only what happened but what always happens, what took place and what always does takes place.

The remainder of our project lies ahead: The following chapters use the *New York Times* to examine case studies of news as myth. Through studies of the *Times*—story by story, word by word—I hope to show how the news tells and retells seven master myths: the Victim, the Scapegoat, the Hero, the Good Mother, the Trickster, the Other World, and the Flood. And I hope to show the social import of these news stories as myths. The next chapter takes up *Times* stories that recount one of humankind's most consequential myths: the Victim.

Part II

Case Studies of News as Myth
