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Narrative Techniques of Fear Mongering

AMERICANS LIVE IN PERHAPS THE SAFEST TIME IN HUMAN HISTORY, SO how has it come about that there are so many fears and scares in the air, and so many of them are unfounded? Why, as crime rates plunged over the past decade, did substantial numbers of Americans say in surveys that they believe the crime rate is rising or remaining steady? Why, despite numerous studies showing that the number of drug users declined substantially during past two decades, did large numbers of Americans rank drug use as the greatest danger to America's youth? Why, at a time when most Americans are living longer and healthier, do many people feel they are at great risk of early death from obscure disorders?

I suggest that the answer to these and related questions lies, in large measure, in the immense power and money that await individuals and organizations who can tap into Americans' moral insecurities for their own benefit. By fear mongering, politicians sell themselves to voters, TV and print newsmagazines sell themselves to viewers and readers, advocacy groups sell memberships, quacks sell treatments, lawyers sell class-action lawsuits, and corporations sell consumer products. A particularly illustrative current example of the last of these is the highly successful marketing of antibacterial soaps, which tend to be more expensive than conventional soaps, confer no greater protection in normal household settings, and may well contribute to the emergence of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Much of the answer to why there are so many misbegotten fears in the air resides in how fear mongers sell their scares. In no small

measure they do it the same way discount stores make their profits: they do it on volume. The point is illustrated by a pair of statistics about crime. Between 1990 and 1998, the murder rate in the United States decreased by 20 percent. During that same period, the number of stories about murder on network newscasts increased by 600 percent. Frequent viewers of evening newscasts were unlikely to have the impression that the crime rate was dropping.

More than volume is involved, however, in successful fear mongering. Fear mongers deploy narrative techniques to normalize what are actually errors in reasoning. Perhaps the most common of these consists in the christening of isolated incidents as trends. Commonly used in fear mongering about groups of people, this stratagem was used in scares about youth violence from the mid-1990s through mid-2001, a period in which, in actuality, the United States experienced a steep downward trend in youth crime. Faced year after year with comforting statistics during this period, fear mongers recast those statistics as “the lull before the storm,” as a *Newsweek* headline in 1995 put it. “We know we’ve got about 6 years to turn this juvenile crime thing around, or our country is going to be living in chaos,” President Bill Clinton asserted in his 1997 State of the Union address, even though the youth violent crime rate had fallen 9.2 percent the previous year.

Six years later the nation was not living with chaos, at least as a result of youth violence, but the bipartisan fear mongering that went on about juvenile crime had demonstrable effects on public perceptions. In surveys conducted during the second half of the 1990s, adult Americans estimated that people under 18 committed about half of all violent crimes, although the actual number is 13 percent.

One important source for such misperceptions was the public discourse regarding school shootings. The buildup began in the academic year 1996-1997, a year in which violence-related deaths in the nation’s schools actually hit a record low: 19 deaths out of 54 million children. Only one in ten public schools reported any serious crime that year, but that was not the impression conveyed in the news media and by fear-mongering politicians. *Time* and *US News and World Report* both

ran headlines that year referring to “teenage time bombs,” and William Bennett, the former secretary of education, proclaimed in a book, “America’s beleaguered cities are about to be victimized by a paradigm-shattering wave of ultra-violent, morally vacuous young people some call the super-predators.”

Instead of the arrival of super-predators, violence by urban youths continued to decline, and so the fear mongering shifted to heinous behavior by young people in rural and suburban areas. After a 16 year old in Pearl, Mississippi, and a 14 year old in West Paducah, Kentucky, went on shooting sprees in late 1997, killing five of their classmates and wounding twelve others, those isolated incidents were taken as evidence of “an epidemic of seemingly depraved adolescent murderers,” as news commentator Geraldo Rivera put it. Three months later, in March 1998, all sense of proportion vanished after two boys, ages 11 and 13, killed four students and a teacher in Jonesboro, Arkansas. No longer, we learned in *Time*, was it “unusual for kids to get back at the world with live ammunition.” When a child psychologist on NBC’s *Today* show advised parents to reassure their children that shootings at schools are very rare, reporter Ann Curry corrected him. “But this is the fourth case since October,” she said.

Over the next couple of months, young people failed to accommodate the trend hawkers. None committed mass murder. Yet fear of killer kids remained very much in the air. The news media made a point of reporting incidents in which a child was caught at school with a gun or making a death threat. In May, 1998, when a 15 year old in Springfield, Oregon, did open fire in a cafeteria filled with students, killing 2 and wounding 23 others, the event felt like a continuation of a “disturbing trend,” the *New York Times* reported. The day after the shooting, on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered,” criminologist Vincent Schiraldi tried to explain that the recent string of incidents did not constitute a trend, that youth homicide rates had declined by 30 percent in recent years, and more than three times as many people were killed by lightning than by violence at schools. But the show’s host, Robert Siegel, interrupted him. “You’re saying these are just anomalous

events?" he asked, audibly peeved. The criminologist reiterated that "anomalous" is precisely the right word to describe the events, and he called it "a grave mistake" to imagine otherwise.

To speak of these incidents is to bring to mind for many people a subsequent and indisputably horrific incident of school violence, the killings at Columbine High School, in Littleton, Colorado. It is worth noting, however, that nearly 12 months passed between the killings in Oregon and the Columbine disaster. Yet after the shootings in Littleton, reporters, politicians, and pundits spoke as if the tragedy there was the continuation of a trend and further evidence of an epidemic, when in point of fact, the Columbine incident was unprecedented in American history. Moreover, the number of students killed in US schools that academic year (1998-1999) was half of what it had been in the early 1990s, when the media and politicians seldom talked about school violence.

During the period of the so-called epidemic of school violence, less than 1 percent of all homicides of school-age children occurred in or around schools. Most of the remainder occurred in homes and other domestic settings, a story seldom told on newscasts.

Journalists, politicians, and others employed another discursive tool as well in fear mongering about youth violence: misdirection. The term comes from the world of stage magic. If a magician wants to make a coin appear to vanish from his right hand, he may try to get the audience to look at his left hand while he gets rid of the coin. A comparable form of misdirection goes on in political and public discourse. Following the Columbine shootings, for instance, the public's attention was directed away from real trends and dangers that confront children and adolescents, such as the fact that tens of millions that do not have health insurance, are malnourished for parts of each month, and attend deteriorating schools. There was misdirection as well from what was the most proximate and verifiable factor in the deaths at Columbine and elsewhere, namely, the ready availability of guns to people who should not have access to them.

Following the Columbine shootings, instead of a clear, focused discussion on keeping guns out of kids' hands, or on the common

causes of distress, ill health, and death among the nation's youth, the public was treated to scary orations about peripheral issues such as the Internet, video games, violent movies, trench coats, and Marilyn Manson recordings, each of which pundits implicated in the Columbine tragedy.

THESE THREE TECHNIQUES OF FEAR MONGERING—REPETITION, THE depiction of isolated incidents as trends, and misdirection—continue in more recent public discourse on actual and potential terrorist attacks in the United States, a predominant focus of fear mongering by public officials since September 11, 2001. That the three techniques are at play in this newer fear narrative becomes evident when one compares relative risks. In 2001, as a result of the attacks of 9/11, the number of deaths from terrorism in the United States was arguably the highest in the nation's history. Yet even during that eventful year, relative to other hazards, the danger from terrorism was low. According to figures published by the State Department, the number of deaths from terrorist attacks worldwide that year was 3,547, more than three-quarters of which were on 9/11 in the United States. By comparison, nearly three times as many Americans died from gun-related homicides that year, and five times as many died in alcohol-related motor-vehicle accidents.

In directing public concern and resources away from those hazards and many others, the newer fear-mongering narrative does not depart from its immediate predecessors, which also served to elevate less common dangers, as we have seen. In another regard, however, fear mongering about domestic dangers from terrorism represents a significant discursive shift. The narrative about terrorism is largely incommensurate with one of the most powerful and pernicious meta-narratives of the previous decades—what might be called the “sick society” story. In that narrative, the villains are domestic, heroes are difficult to find, and the storyline is about the decline of American civilization.

That narrative, it seems to me, diverges from the one that has emerged in the public discourse post-9/11. In the newer narrative,

the American way of life is portrayed as the envy of the world and the storyline is about a great nation pulling together to fight a common enemy. The villains are from foreign lands, and the heroes of the tale are soldiers.

One result of this discursive shift is the putative dangerousness of certain categories of people and behaviors. In particular, and in sharp contrast to the sick society story, the new narrative augurs well for American males in their late teens and twenties, who have been portrayed very differently in the media and by politicians post-9/11 as compared with the preceding period I discussed earlier. In the more recent period, there has been little in the public discourse about youth violence and degeneracy. Rather than destructive forces, young American males have been portrayed as heroes in the New York City Fire Department and in the US military.

Plainly, the old story does not fit with the recent celebration of American society and its citizens, and calls upon young Americans to make wartime sacrifices. Nor do the presumed pathogens of the old sick society story fit neatly into the new narrative. If in the wake of the school shootings, products of popular American culture such as Marilyn Manson recordings, rap music, computer games, and action films were routinely cited as pathogens or causes of the decline, more recently, in stories about the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the war on terrorism, those products occupy a very different place. American popular culture is referenced not as an infectious agent that turns kids into killers, but as a feature of our society that is wrongly reviled by our enemies.

In suggesting this, I do not mean to imply that the news media—TV news and print newsmagazines in particular—have ceased to exaggerate minor dangers by means of repetition, treating isolated incidents as trends, and misdirection. Rather, I am suggesting that some topics recede from public view if they do not fit into the prevailing narrative. Stories about school violence and talk of “super predators” have been rare since 9/11. Indeed, in the period immediately after 9/11, media coverage of infrequent dangers of all sorts became scarce. In the

months just prior to the attacks, it was difficult to turn on a television news programs without hearing about shark attacks or the abduction of an intern, Chandra Levy, in Washington, D.C. Apparently, after the terrorist attacks, sharks were fearful of coming near the shore and potential kidnappers in the nation's capital took an extended holiday. Coverage of those dangers disappeared from news programs.

Other of the minor dangers whose coverage I have monitored in the news media over the past couple of decades have gradually returned, however. For example, an edition of *US News and World Report* in 2004 featured a story that has been recycled repeatedly. "I'm On Fire: Blazes Sparked in Surgery Are on the Rise," read the headline. As in many scare stories in the print media, by way of compelling personal anecdotes and accompanying photographs of victims, an impression is conveyed of a widespread danger Americans face if they undergo surgery. Eventually the reporter does give the pertinent statistic—about a hundred such fires are reported annually, of which twenty patients are injured and two, on average, die. Of the many potential risks that confront patients in US hospitals, combustion during surgery is very low on the probability list.

Earlier still, in the summer of 2002, the television news channels returned to one of their perennial favorites: child kidnapping. Less than a year after the September 11 attacks, throughout July and August of that year, the major cable news networks routinely included frightening stories about that topic in their broadcasts. They ran stories about an American girl who had been kidnapped that summer, about two girls who were murdered in Britain, and about jury deliberations in the trial of a man accused of murdering another American girl earlier that year. The news channels even ran stories about the need for more stories on child kidnapping. According to a report on CNN, the media largely ignores the kidnapping of a child who is not from "a picture perfect neighborhood and seemingly secure home."

On his Fox News Channel show, host Bill O'Reilly spoke of "100,000 abductions of children by strangers every year in the United States," though according to the FBI, the actual number is about 100. In reality,

children were more likely to be struck by lightning than kidnapped by strangers and several times more likely to die from preventable injuries in their homes. Police agencies were reporting fewer cases of stranger kidnapping than in previous years, and less than half as many per year than in the 1980s, but O'Reilly was far from alone in suggesting a problem of major proportions. In reporting on the several isolated incidents, reporters used words like "trend" and "epidemic."

Far from innocuous, such scares direct attention away from more serious problems and are costly. That wave of fear mongering about child abduction, like others before it, resulted in additional legislation that increased the levels of policing and public attention directed at the matter and curtailed civil liberties. In response to previous fear campaigns exaggerating the dangers of drug users and of violence by youths, Americans spent billions of dollars apprehending and incarcerating people who present little or no danger to others, and turning schools into virtual prisons by means of security devices and personnel.

Can anyone doubt that these funds would have saved or bettered more lives had they been put to use educating, treating, and feeding young Americans? Instead, in a culture of fear, politicians and advocacy groups use and abuse collective anxieties for narrow political gains. Having helped to instill fears, they capitalize upon them to win elections, to solicit campaign contributions, and to push through pet programs that tend to increase the coercive powers of the state.

NOTES

This paper is adapted from Glassner (2000, 2001, 2002), which contain pertinent citations.

REFERENCES

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