

When Twerking is the Top Story:

An examination of media power and its implications for the existence of a free press.

On August 20, 2013, North Korean pop icon Hyon Song-wol and 11 other performers were executed by a North Korean firing squad (Robinson). The Unhasu Orchestra star and her fellow singers and dancers had been arrested three days earlier when they were charged with the distribution of pornography—a capital crime in North Korea—for having allegedly created and sold videos of themselves engaged in a variety of sexual activities (Ryall). While this narrative is being held unofficially by North Korean authorities (who rarely publicly admit to executions or other human rights violations), political dissidents within the communist regime tell a different story: Hyon Song-wol was, after all, a former girlfriend of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, and once competed with Jong-un's wife in the Unhasu Orchestra. According to these dissidents, the entertainers were murdered by state police because Jong-un's wife was jealous of his ex's popularity (Ryall). Whether the crime is distributing a sex video or being more popular than your glorious leader's wife, neither is a justifiable excuse for murder; the simple fact is that 12 talented performers were murdered by a ruthless regime for inexcusably petty reasons.

Five days later, on August 25, Miley Cyrus twerked live onstage during the 2013 Video Music Awards. By August 28, “twerk” had been added to the Oxford online dictionary (defined as a verb meaning “dance to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance”) (Robehmed).

Unsurprisingly, the execution of Hyon Song-wol has received virtually no media coverage in the West, while plenty of ink has been shed about Ms. Cyrus' lewd gyrations.

Though the former story has yet to make its way to the mainstream media, the latter continues to receive significant coverage, even over a month later. The media attention, whether good or bad, that has been lavished upon Ms. Cyrus in the wake of the twerking incident is only the latest example of Western culture's obsession with celebrity antics at the expense of hard news. Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" at her 2004 Super Bowl performance with Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears shaving her head, and Lindsay Lohan's descent into drugs and alcoholism – these are just a few of the celebrity stories picked up by mass media that have overshadowed arguably more important news items of their time. Of course, the standards by which we judge the worthiness of any given piece of news vary from individual to individual, but is our obsession with celebrity simply indicative of questionable decision-making capabilities on the part of the general public, or symptomatic of a much larger concern about media's ability to control messaging through agenda setting and gatekeeping for the purposes of hegemonic domination? While some media scholars may be concerned about the costs (in terms of personal privacy and human dignity) of maintaining a free press, it is arguably more important to determine first if a free press even actually exists.

Though media organizations may operate in accordance with standards of objectivity and impartiality, there can be no denying that, like all other corporate endeavours, their purpose, for better or worse, is ultimately to amass profit. Equally importantly, the capitalist environment in which they exist is founded on advertising revenue that flows to the media outlets through their corporate customers. This makes maintaining the status quo all the more important, as media firms' solvency becomes reliant on the health and well-being of its highest paying advertisers, who in turn require the same healthy business atmosphere. What results is a conflation of interests between the mass media industry and general industry as a whole. As noted media

scholars Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen Reese observed, "...for most commercial media, audiences are important only because their attention can be sold to advertisers, who provide the bulk of revenues. And advertisers often tell media what they think and how they believe content should be altered" (219). The result is an environment where gatekeeping and agenda setting is not merely in the media industry's best interests, but integral to the maintenance of the entire capitalist structure as a whole. Instead of being free, the press is the means by which the status quo, as laid out by the very same powerful organizations it supposedly checks against, is maintained. This concept, and the means by which it is made manifest, is perhaps best articulated by noted linguist, author, and political and media activist/analyst Noam Chomsky in his 2007 article on media and double standards:

What you do is just presuppose the party line, never say it, and then you encourage vigorous debate within the framework established by the party line. That gives the impression that the society is free and open, and also helps instill the party line, because you can't even carry out the debate unless you accept it. And so it just becomes like air you breathe, and you accept the way the world is. (19)

There is, however, a common belief that the power of media influence is greatly exaggerated. This obvious counter-argument proposes that our capacity for critical thinking is capable of resisting attempts by media to exert control, but such a claim is demonstrably untrue; if anything, the power of media influence is grossly understated. For example, Lei Guo shows that media can control not just the nature of individual stories in the news, but direct multiple conversations at the same time. In developing the Network Agenda Setting Model, the University of Texas researcher uncovered the capability of news media organizations to "...bundle different sets of objects or attributes and make these bundles of elements salient in the

public's mind simultaneously"(65). Globalization has also greatly enhanced the power of mass media to control national and even international conversation. As Dr. Herbert Schiller rightly points out in his authoritative book *Culture, Inc.*, "The long standing dominance of Western media... has been augmented by the enormous power of the multinational corporate system" (144). And while it may be comforting for us to believe that our mental faculties are up to the challenge of resisting the endless tide of tweets, blogs, vlogs, and newspaper, magazine, and even nightly television twerk reporting, we are simply not up to the task. When audiences are confronted with the same unrelenting messages across all media channels and mediums, their critical-thinking capacity is simply overwhelmed (156). Dr. Schiller somewhat chillingly concludes:

Theories that ignore the structure and locus of representational and definitional power and emphasize instead the individual's message transformational capability present little threat to the maintenance of the established order. (156)

Obviously none of this is meant to convey any sort of conspiratorial agenda, or imply that media's decision to highlight celebrity antics over politically motivated executions in overseas nations is anything more than a business decision. Instead, a less sinister but much more immutable reality becomes clear, in which individual impotence to resist overwhelming media power leaves audiences at the mercy of massive organizations that report on what they want, when they want, as often as they want, for the purposes of supporting and maintaining the social and economic structures that serve them. Given this context, the claim that a free press even exists is as preposterous as pretending a twenty year-old twerking on camera is worthier of media attention than the execution of a dozen innocent souls.

References

- Busis, Hillary. "Miley Cyrus Takes Over Saturday Night Live Tonight!" *Entertainment Weekly Online*. Web. 5 Oct. 2013. <<http://popwatch.ew.com/2013/10/05/miley-cyrus-saturday-night-live/>>
- Chomsky, Noam. "The Poisoned Chalice." *Extra!* 20.4 (2007): 16-19. *OmniFile Full Text Select (H.W. Wilson)*. Web. 25 Sept. 2013.
- Lei, Guo, Vu Hong Tien, and Maxwell McCombs. "An Expanded Perspective on Agenda-Setting Effects. Exploring The Third Level Of Agenda Setting." *Revista De Comunicación* 11. (2012): 51-68. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 26 Sept. 2013.
- Robinson, Rick. "What You Should Have Been Looking at while Miley Cyrus was Twerking." *River City News*. Web. 31 Aug. 2013. 5 Oct. 2013. <<http://rcnky.com/articles/2013/08/31/rick-robinson-what-you-should-have-been-looking-while-miley-was-twerking>>
- Ryall, Julian. "Kim Jong-un's ex-lover 'executed by firing squad'" *The Telegraph*. 29 Aug. 2013. 5 Oct. 2013. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/10272953/Kim-Jong-uns-ex-lover-executed-by-firing-squad.html>>
- Schiller, Herbert I. *Culture, Inc. [Electronic Resource]: The Corporate Takeover Of Public Expression*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. *MacEwan University Catalog*. Web. 26 Sept. 2013.
- Shoemaker, Pamela J., and Stephen D. Reese. *Mediating The Message : Theories Of Influences On Mass Media Content*. White Plains, New York: Longman, 1996.
- "Twerk" *Oxford Online Dictionary*. 2013. <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/twerk?q=twerk>>