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April 7, 2014

Expository Writing

Led by the False ‘Shepard’ through the Citadel

One of the greatest issues facing American society at this moment is the rapid degradation and decomposition of the mass media. A group of companies which once held the pride and trust of a nation are now under scrutiny of the public eye. More and more people are awakening to the fact that these huge conglomerates are in fact, businesses with their own motives, and by misconstruing key aspects of stories, are able to make a substantially greater profit. Through a close reading of “The Naked Citadel” by Susan Faludi and *Losing Matt Shepard* by Beth Loffreda, one can observe how sources of media are not alone in the misrepresentation of stories and how these ‘white lies’ and simplifications of truth can be used to interesting means. The most powerful implication of this strategy is in the generalization of individual identity, which, when exploited, allows people to relate emotionally to stories they may have otherwise skimmed over. In a fashion similar to that of a dramatic television show, the gritty details and over-emphasized aspects of these headline stories hook viewers who feel a new sense of emotional attachment to the players involved. By creating myriad strong connections with the majority of the population, providers of information have the power to sway social opinions and alter deep-rooted ideologies.

The uses of individual identity simplification run rampant throughout “The Naked Citadel” as well as *Losing Matt Shepard*. In “The Naked Citadel”, the story of Shannon Faulkner is brought to light. Faulkner was the first woman to apply and be accepted to The Citadel, a private male-only military academy in South Carolina. Because of certain ritualistic activities performed by the young men on campus and the overall misogynistic attitude of The Citadel, a number of faculty and ‘cadets’ believe the inception of a woman into their closed culture will cause severe problems. By simplifying Faulkner’s identity into that of a “‘Bitch,’ ‘Dyke,’ ‘Whore,’ and ‘Lesbo,’” the cadets were trying to induce emotional connections in the other members of the community, especially those who hadn’t even heard of the woman (Faludi 94). The fact that the only offense the cadets could muster about Faulkner was to resort to calling her ‘bad words’ is, in effect, exemplary of their dilemma. They are determined to keep this ‘intruder’ out of their school but have no ammunition, no legitimate argument against her admission. By appealing to the emotional, rather than logical, parts of people’s psyches they hope to establish an overall distaste for Faulkner and her cause without necessarily needing any substantial reason. Case in point; who would want a so-called ‘bitch’ or a ‘dyke’ around when everything is working fine as is? The cadets and Citadel alumni also strongly denounced Faulkner as a secret agent or “‘pawn’ of the National Organization for Women, or-a theory repeatedly posited [by] cadets-‘Her mother put her up to it’” (Faludi 96). These false accusations helped to shuffle more people to the side of The Citadel as they began to lose faith in Faulkner. By claiming she was a ‘pawn’ the cadets were both belittling Faulkner’s integrity while also steering attention away from her positive attributes. Despite these assertions to feminist connections, Shannon Faulkner actually publicly labeled herself as an ‘individualist,’ she also was “almost indifferent to feminist affairs; when [Faludi] mentioned Gloria Steinem’s name once in conversation, Shannon asked [her], ‘Who’s that?’” (Faludi 96). If Faulkner had at any point sworn allegiance to a feminist group or had ever even looked into the feminist movements of the past; she would be fully aware of Gloria Steinem. This somewhat shocking reaction proves that The Citadel was once again faulty in its claims about Faulkner and her cause. To the benefit of The Citadel and its pro-gender segregation ideologies, a combination of these identity-simplification techniques helped the masses relate to the situation caused by the false representation of Shannon Faulkner.

The story told in *Losing Matt Shepard* is of a much darker nature but still exemplifies how strongly integrated identity simplification has become. Matt Shepard was an openly gay college student living in Laramie, Wyoming when one night, out of nowhere he was assaulted and left for dead, tied up to a fence post. In order to shift the country’s attention to the murder, media reporters turned Matt into “the nuclear son of the nuclear family” (Loffreda 241). Meaning only the members of one’s close family; Loffreda’s use of the word ‘nuclear’ in this passage is meant to exemplify just how identifiable the broadcasting networks made Matt. In a way, people begin to think of Matt as if he was their son, neighbor, or relative, which caused the story to hit home. The television companies also obsessed on Matt’s physical appearance; “Perhaps it was merely the insistent repetition of his image in those early day. In the few snapshots that circulated the press, Matt appeared boyish, pensive, sweet, charmingly vulnerable in oversized wool sweaters…” (Loffreda 241). If none of media’s prior attempts to condition their viewers had worked, then this direct appeal to emotion would have certainly done the job. Despite their ethnic background or personal views, anyone following the news would have been struck with an immediate sense of sorrow and compassion upon being presented with Matt’s surprisingly familiar face and reading the adhered caption. Jim Osborn, a former acquaintance of Matt’s, explains the situation perfectly, “Matt was ‘someone we [could] identify with. Matt was the boy next door. He looked like everybody’s brother and everybody’s neighbor. He looked like he could have been anyone’s son’” (Loffreda 241). Similar to the oversimplified, completely inaccurate representation of Shannon Faulkner, Matt Shepard’s identity was condensed from that of a homosexual university student into something entirely different, something the majority of America could have no trouble relating to. It is in this blinding and deliberate process of emotional connection that the addictive quality of current media lies.

The power of identity simplification does not become apparent until one looks deeper at just how it can be used to affect populations of individuals. As explained prior, the oversimplification of one’s identity is utilized to aid others in understanding and relating to certain stories and issues that arise in society but its implications delve far deeper than that. By adhering to these partisan representations of personas, viewer’s ideologies and beliefs can actually be altered substantially. In *Losing Matt Shepard*, it has already been exposed that Matt’s identity was skewed, but how does that subsequently affect the viewing population? Being that Laramie, Wyoming is located on the ‘frontier’ of America’s previously ‘wild west’, it can be inferred that it may not be as popular and may not share as much publicity as other, more interesting cities of comparable size. In this absence of knowledge or connection to any part of Laramie or its residents, the emotionally hooked viewers of media have only one source of new information, the media. This undoubtedly creates a detrimental scenario because these people are hungry for more details and will devour anything they’re fed, despite its faults. In the case of the death of Matt Shepard, the first real effect of his identity simplification is the false criminality of the town of Laramie. Because the entire world was on the side of Matt Shepard and his overly simplified, easily relatable identity, they began to look for answers and any feasible reason for such an act to occur. Despite its innocent past as explained by Jim Osborn, “Nobody expects murder here-nobody. This is not a place where you kill your neighbor, and we see each other as neighbors. This is a good place,” Laramie was represented by the media as having “that cowboy mentality” and was called by some, “the hate state” (Loffreda 231). In a time when the American population was seeking someone or something to blame, the frailties of Laramie became an anchor upon which anger and hate festered. An oddly similar mentality develops in the minds of the cadets of The Citadel after they are subjected to the overly simplified representation of Shannon Faulkner. Because certain members of The Citadel stressed a ‘bitchy’ identity on Faulkner and asserted that she was working for secret feminist societies, students began to feel threatened, uneasy. Even the Citadel’s president, Claudius Elmer “a retired Air Force lieutenant general and a second-generation Citadel alumnus, [viewed] Shannon Faulkner’s legal efforts as an enemy invasion, placing his young troops ‘under attack’” (Faludi 83). The significance of Shannon Faulkner’s ‘enemy invasion’ cannot be stressed enough as it is basically a call of action from the president of The Citadel for his troops, the students, to retaliate. The president clearly understood that his students, having chosen to apply to a military academy, were yearning for something different, some way of fighting for their leaders and proving their worthiness. In response to his call for action students began writing harsh graffiti representing their swayed views; “The inscription that most stuck in his mind: ‘Let her in-then fuck her to death’” (Faludi 98). By simplifying the identities of Matt Shepard and Shannon Faulkner, certain groups were able to thrust specific emotions and viewpoints into the minds of the general public, eliciting strong responses and exemplifying the power of such action.

The power of a strategic identity simplification is undoubtedly strong, and its effect on the viewing population is unquestionably formidable so this only leaves one remaining question; why are these sources of information so intent on implementing them and what possible benefit could they have? This question is very event-specific so clearly, being that they took place in two entirely different decades and locations, the reasons behind individual identity simplifications are dissimilar in *Losing Matt Shepard* and “The Naked Citadel.” In the case of the murder of Matt Shepard, people were quick to blame the town of Laramie but over time shifted their attention to something entirely different. What first drew attention to the murder, “the notion that Matt had been strung up in something akin to a crucifixion,” began to enlighten people to the fact that this murder may have been a hate crime; Matt may have been targeted for his proudly open homosexuality (Loffreda 227). By creating a story centralized on such a relatable, nuclear persona as Matt, the media drew the attention it needed to help pass hate crime legislation and raise awareness of such tragedies. This extended even into the federal government when “On October 15th, the day before Shepard’s funeral, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a resolution condemning the murder” (Loffreda 238). Clearly the majority of murders in America do not get attention from the federal government and the fact that Matt’s was able to force such action is a resolution to the power of the simplification of identity. The need for a more serious approach to the problem of hate crimes was even mentioned at a memorial service for Matt; “This was a crime of humiliation. This crime was all about being gay… We must find a way to commemorate this awful week in a way that will say to the entire state and nation that we will not forget what happened here” (Loffreda 238). This call for action is exemplary of the attitude brought about by Matt’s highly publicized murder and represents one of the many reasons for identity simplification. As opposed to the heroic call for hate crime legislation in “Losing Matt Shepard”, Shannon Faulkner’s simplified identity in “The Naked Citadel” is developed solely to oppose her attendance to The Citadel. At first, when questioned as to why Faulkner should have been kept out of the school, many of the younger cadets were speechless, citing reasons such as how it would make them uncomfortable or how The Citadel would need to invest in buying thousands of shades for its windows. One cadet even says that it would interrupt the underclassmen shower routines “his voice trailed off. ‘I just can’t explain it but when they take that away, it’s over. This place will be ruined’” (Faludi 80). Clearly the students are disjointed at best when it comes to opposing Faulkner’s attendance and require some kind of uniting banner. Through simplifying the woman’s identity and condemning her as working for ‘feminist groups,’ the students have been provided a common ground to oppose. This newfound organization brought upon acts of misogynistic accord and spurred events which would serve to instill fear into Faulkner, “A few days after the judge ordered The Citadel to admit Faulkner to the Corps of Cadets, morning rush-hour drivers in Charleston passed by a huge portable sign that read ‘Die Shannon,’” (Faludi 94). This direct threat to Faulkner’s life, along with several other attempts to scare her out of attendance to The Citadel, were insufficient to keep someone as dedicated as herself from pursuing her ambitions. By forcing overly simplified identities on Matt Shepard and Shannon Faulkner, two very different groups of people sought after two very different goals by uniting masses of viewers and calling for action. Whether they were successful, as in the hate crime legislation passed and acceptance of homosexuals after the death of Matt Shepard, or they failed as in The Citadel’s attempts to keep Shannon Faulkner out of its classrooms, they both serve to represent the power of shifting opinions and emotional investment.

Throughout “The Naked Citadel” and *Losing Matt Shepard*, Susan Faludi and Beth Loffreda expose many aspects of how the media and, society in general, distort certain events. By creating simplified individual identities for people involved in popular dealings, the culture is able to make situations more relatable and help people to understand slightly more complicated aspects of stories. On the flipside, the media can also use these ‘nuclear’ identities to sway public opinion and incite action through direct access to the emotional, less rational regions of people’s brains. In the end, it is safe to say that people should definitely question what they see on the news and hear on the radio because, unbeknownst to them, the use of over simplified identities may be at play.