

The da Vinci System
By G.D. Goya

The death of Mark Bentley marked the turning point in modern journalism, yet no self-respecting journalist would dare to admit it. Hate and opposition aside, his legacy is clear in the form of incredible viewership and remarkable innovation within a dying industry. Mark Bentley, the fear mongering force behind Hammer-Fist News, helped change the industry landscape and became one of the first news organizations to exist solely on social and alternative media platforms. Beaming his golden voice through the electronic airways with the poise of a rattlesnake, Mark Bentley made his mark in and gained success in the largely unexplored world of the frantic, and taboo. Despite being underfunded and outcast as a concerning, right-wing extremist, Mark Bentley built an empire of news programs in areas which were hardly regarded by established media conglomerates at conception.

The nimble journalist first popped up on the scene by producing a series of online videos targeting the Bush administration's use of torture on Islamic prisoners of war. His videos exploded after a series of leaks corroborated Mark's claims and he managed to obtain first hand footage of the abuse. The videos of the torture, which featured force feeding, pressure hosing, and locking detainees inside boxes filled with insects, alongside Mark Bentley's narration, went viral and flooded internet channels throughout the world. Soon after, Bentley was popping up on news programs across America soaking up the fame and plugging Hammer-Fist News along with it. These interviews would be the last time that Mark Bentley would appear on national television and would end a streak of violent, loud television appearances that featured him debating the various conspiracies that he loved to indulge in. Instead of television, Mark turned his attention to social media, buying exclusive channels on upcoming apps, and ensuring his place in the phones of millions of young Americans. His messages were short, and his videos were simple, but they caught the attention of an army of fervent followers. Always stressing the idea that no one was to be trusted, Mark let loose a swarm of conspiracy videos ranging from outing the corrupt behavior of politicians, to busting various mythical news stories he viewed as propaganda across as many channels on the internet as he could find. Hammer-Fist News became a force to be reckoned with and any video of Mark gushing hate from his mouth could arrange an array of angry minions in a moment's notice.

At first, news conglomerates were slow to respond, but it didn't take them long to realize that Mark Bentley was a serious threat to their revenue, audience, and agenda. The attempts to discredit him grew far and wide, but were largely unsuccessful. Being the fat, bald, unbashful person that he was, Mark was hardly the kind of man who couldn't take a shot. He rolled with the punches and ignored the criticism while continuing to publish the aggressive and controversial stories his listeners loved. His enemies eventually came for his sponsorship, but he confided with exclusive sponsors who weren't afraid to shy away from his extremities. His vision materialized in a flag built of weapon accessories, cigar brands, and choice whiskeys, and Mark was finding new ways to monetize his content by integrating his partnerships into his programs, and sometimes news stories.

Fearing that sponsorships weren't enough for his fully realized dream, Mark Bentley hit the road, and turned Hammer-Fist News into a travelling circus which broadcast live from various ports across the country. Mark's flagship show was soon selling out auditoriums and pool halls in cities most Americans have never heard of. He brought along local talent, vendors, comedians, rock stars, and would top the show with a Bentley broadcast filled with screaming, cursing, and sometimes-destructive climaxes such as the time he used a sledge hammer to destroy a brand-new Kia Forte while screaming about unfair trade laws. Bentley capped off that show by handing his sludge hammer off to a team of Ford assembly

workers, and drove off stage in brand new Ford Focus to let them finish the job. He had a taste for the theatrical and his performances, while still broadcast for free online, were gaining immense popularity. Despite molding himself into a joke of sorts, Mark had made himself untouchable; securing his revenue streams and cementing himself a place in the pantheon of journalism, if you dare call him such a thing. I was turned on to Mark Bentley by a colleague at the hospital who had a flair for the supernatural, and paranoia. I never took the Bentley too seriously, but over time, I grew fond of his antics and taste for the melodramatic. The man was a bit of a comedian to me, and while I didn't care to admit it, I found myself becoming a regular listener, even considering going to one of his frequent shows in the Tampa area where we are both natives.

When he visited us at the Memorial Hospital in Tampa it came as a surprise despite his obvious visual health issues. The hospital became alive with uneasy buzz ranging from hate, to concealed admiration, and whispers of his health concerns echoed through the hall, especially exciting the fellow surgical technologist who first introduced me to the eccentric entertainer. When the word came out that Mark needed open heart surgery, the hospital gossip became livelier than ever. Mark Bentley, not wanting to leave his beloved home state, while still wanting to secure the best heart surgeon in the country, had opted to sign up for the da Vinci System; a surgical procedure in which a doctor using a control monitor could perform the surgery from across the country while a robot copied his movements with a spectacular degree of accuracy. Us surgical technologists had had a fair amount of experience with the da Vinci system, and I enjoyed working with the machine because its involvement limited my own to basic operating room sanitation while the duty of prepping the robot was passed onto a more specialized colleague. The operations had been a doozy in the past, and fascinated me to no extent, so when word came out that Mark Bentley would be undergoing the robotic knife, I jumped at the opportunity to work it. Disappointing my eager co-worker, I was assigned to the surgery instead of himself and would bear witness to the strangest incidents in my conventional life.

The surgery came with the inevitability of a Florida rainstorm; popping up in my schedule faster than I had ever anticipated. The day before, America had announced the largest military strike in five years on an area in eastern Afghanistan. Normally, Mark would have had his greasy fingers all over the story, but that day he was in a hospital having a hard time refraining from eating while complaining to the nurse who was unlucky enough to be charged with shaving the heaps of hair off his barreled chest. Soon after, the anesthetics kicked in, and the boisterous mind was put to sleep for the very last time. I spent a fair amount of time prepping the operating room while another technician prepared the machine; both of us being careful to not make a mistake while in the spotlight of a national icon. It wasn't too much longer until his unconscious body was wheeled into the room, covered in sheets except for an isolated spot on his chest. I went through the usual movements of disinfecting the surgical area and found myself feeling a little hysterical as I wiped iodine onto the great, American paunch which had accumulated over years of screaming behind a news desk.

With my initial efforts done, I sat back and relaxed until I was needed again. The surgeon from New York popped up on a screen and began his communications with the Tampa team which was led by another successful surgeon from our area. Together, they filed through the preliminary movements with the usual, dry touch that only surgeons can master. Careening his pinched towards the camera, the New York man surveyed the room, and let loose a corny joke about performing the surgery in his pajamas, and not having to disinfect like the rest of us. After allowing himself the indulgence, the surgeon was seemingly ready to conduct the procedure, and began directing his cohorts of underlings.

The bulky machine's appendages were arranged over the body, and, with the doctor's orders, were brought to life. The four arms of the robot, each wielding different tools ranging from shears to forceps, swung into place and readied for their intended purposes. Standing closer than I perhaps should have, I observed the spider-like contraption with an interest that will probably never wane. To think that this buzzing apparatus wielding razor sharp instruments was the surrogate for a masterful doctor a thousand miles away was astonishing. The crouching arms of the da Vinci System sprang into action, organizing themselves in order of necessity while the surgeon orchestrated their movements from his office across the country with simple, pinching controls. A blade connected to the arm furthest from me took lead, and it hovered to the marked incision site with calculated swiftness. After coming to a halt above the top of its target, the doctor began his dictation of the procedure and profound stillness crept upon the room as the other attendants desperately waited for him to conclude.

The doctor proceeded to lull through the laborious checklist of introductions and narrations, but as he babbled on, motion from the shear-equipped-arm positioned above Mark Bentley's body caught my eye. The blades slowly sputtered to life and spun in a circular motion, waning back and forth as if controlled by a neglectful child. The whining sound they made as they twirled about slowly gathered the room's attention away from the monitor, and noticing the lapse in concentration, the surgeon asked if there was a disturbance. He was quickly reassured by the technician that the slight malfunction would be taken care of. Pushing his oversized spectacles back up the bridge of his nose, the doctor grunted, and returned to his ramblings. I kept my focus on the technician, but held my place for fear of interfering with his work. It was my assumption that the technician had the situation under control, but after the entire arm of the machine began to move, I could see a worried expression appear beneath his mask. Suddenly alive with motion, the arm jutted forward and swiped its cutlery across the yellowed skin of the patient. A stream of blood jutted out the edges of the cut, and the technician gasped in shock.

The disturbance caught the attention of the rest of the room as well as the vexed surgeon, and his screaming voice cracked through the speakers demanding an answer to the madness. Plunging into another arch, the arm sliced a second, sloppy gap in the disinfected area, and the room erupted into a frenzy. The technician reached forth and attempted to stop a third, however, the arm spun at him and cut a streak through the palm of his hand, ripping through his glove. The technician fell to the floor and shrieked from what I believe was the shock of being infected by the blood of such a famous and unhealthy person. At this point, the room scattered, and the ill-intending robot began its free reign upon the patient. Its blade ascended to Mark Bentley's head, and with crude maneuvering, it sunk its shanks into his eye socket, scraping his cheek along the way. Once lodged in his pupil, the blades began a wickedly fast rotation, sputtering about in his eye, and flinging tissue matter across the room. It sank further and found its way into the man's brain where it jerked about with such force both the machine and hospital bed began to rock, clattering their wheels on the tiling as they went. The tool tried to pull free, but it frightfully found itself stuck inside. Giving up on the first, a second arm buzzed to life, and continued the work of its predecessor. The arm whipped towards his chest, penetrating deep into his flesh where it could, and scrapping violently on bone when it couldn't. It dragged along the rib cage squirting blood in its wake, and tore through the surgical sheets until it plunged deep down into his gut where it jumbled around for too long. The hideous display was brought to a halt when a nurse had the sense to unplug the machine while the rest of the room stood frozen in shock. The momentary period of silence was soon replaced by sobbing and yelling of various kinds while the doctor signed off and his screen went blank. Just as the local surgeon had pronounced him dead, reinforcements entered the room and began their emergency efforts. I couldn't help but stand still and lament the idea that what I had just seen was the very last Bentley Broadcast; our own private showing, and a horrid one indeed.

What happened next was a nightmare of policy and law enforcement. Video evidence cleared the New York surgeon of any wrong doing, and machine diagnostics prepared by the technician showed that he had performed his job correctly. Eventually, the incident was ruled as a freak malfunction, and the hospital was hit with lawsuits from both the Bentley family and Hammer-Fist News. Those of us in the room were forced to sign non-disclosure agreements, and several people present for the operation either resigned or requested transfer. With the details of the event sealed along with Mark Bentley's tomb, the story broke as a death from surgical complications and it was quickly washed away like the deaths of Gary Webb and Andrew Breitbart. The Bentley family and Hammer-Fist News settled out of court, and Hammer-Fist news soon replaced their figurehead with a brash, up-and-coming British journalist whose eccentricities made Mark Bentley look like a plain bagel. The gallant communicator had died, but the template he created would live on and continue to dominate the news cycle.

For me, things remained relatively the same. I kept my job at the hospital, and continued my plans for retirement. Surgeries came and went, people were lost and saved, and it seemed as though that day in OR was nothing but a distant memory. Yet, with my final days at the hospital approaching, I fear that that memory will fade into obscurity to the point where no one will know what had actually occurred. I was present during Mark Bentley's death. They said it was a malfunction, but myself and the other witnesses know the appalling truth. I have been seen enough da Vinci Surgeries to be familiar with how they behave, and I am certain that someone was controlling that robot. No malfunction, no matter how sporadic, would perform like that lethal gadget did. It was no doubt the work of the inexperienced, but by the way the pinchers cut up and down that poor man's body, I could tell there were human hands on the other side. I confess to my limited knowledge of technology, and cannot detail the specifics, but I know for a fact that someone, somewhere had gained access to the system and enacted some form of sick revenge.

Typing my account up, I find it easy to see parallels in old Mark Bentley stories. The crazy conspiracy theorist used to spend hours bellowing about the how government was hacking into the various electronic outlets of our lives. He commanded that you fear things far and wide from refrigerators with unnecessary Wi-Fi connections, to the cell phone tucked away in your pocket. I remember a piece he did about government agencies having the ability to hack into modern cars and control them by pumping the breaks, acceleration, and other functions at will. These allegations were followed by the death of the respected Rolling Stone journalist Michael Hastings in a freak automobile accident, and then a WikiLeaks document revealing the CIA's ability to remotely control cars in such a way. Mark was not wrong. Us plebeians should fear the forces in the shadows. After perceiving a man's death at the hands of a machine, and the control of some ghost operator, I seem to have a firm grip on the reality of the situation. Someone wanted him dead, and made it so. We live in a time of beguiling transparency, and it is easy to have the truth swept under the rug for the sake of easy answers. The common question floating around seems to be, "Did someone hack the machine used to kill Mark Bentley?" That seems obvious. Instead, people should be asking whether or not it will happen again.