Lia Tsvetanova

Dr. Walters

12/07

The Journalist and the Murderer

Right off the bat, Janet Malcolm opens the book by criticizing journalists and their work, “Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people’s vanity, ignorance, loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse.” (3) In the following lines, she bashes journalists and their ulterior motives when they’re doing their job. I don’t necessarily completely disagree with her argument here. Yes, to put all journalists under this umbrella term of being evil and judging them as a whole is wrong. A lot of them lie to get what they want or leave critical informational out. Omission takes play in that. But not all of them are as cruel as Malcolm describes them to be. Most of them conduct honest interviews and real reporting to get the truth out whether it’s ugly or not. In rare cases, there’s an exception of when or why journalists and reporters should lie. To reach impossible conclusions and dive deep into a story, takes a lot of courage and sometimes lies. The subjects are oblivious to how the story would be told from the eyes of the reporter but all they can do is just trust.

When Malcolm had to interview a journalist herself, I felt as if she was nervous. “I had never interviewed a journalist before, and was curious about what would develop between me and a journalistically knowledgeable, rather than naïve, subject. Here, clearly, there would be none of the moral uneasiness that the naïve subject all but forces journalist to endure as the price of opportunity to once again point out the frailty of the human nature.” (7-8) She goes on to say that her and McGinnis would be like two experimenters rather than an experimenter and a subject. The colossal difference between a subject and an interviewer is that the one asking the question is the one in control. In some cases, the interviewee could lie and take control without the journalist even noticing. But in this book, the whole story revolves around how Malcolm walked into this almost blindly, thinking she’d have a story about an innocent man, which then led her to realize that there is so much evidence against Jeffrey MacDonald. Going back to morality, Malcolm would be considered a hypocrite for calling out journalists and their bad traits when she, in fact, acted exactly like that. She lied to the subject and kept information from him. She didn’t even let him read the book let alone have a sneak peak of what she’s writing. MacDonald felt betrayed and trust was broken.

During the cross-examination where Kornstein asked Wambaugh a series of questions, Wambaugh made a great argument of why authors lie to subjects. He gave examples from his book *The Onion Field*, where he interviewed a number of witnesses of a murder and the actual murderer. He confessed that he lied to his subject solely because he wanted him to keep talking. “… Because my ultimate responsibility was not to that person, my responsibility was to the book.” (54) Although, gaslighting people in their most vulnerable states is very wrong, people have a job to write a story and if the subject shuts them off, the story is over. This is an example of an exception of why journalists would lie. Malcolm doesn’t like that the business works this way, but you have to sacrifice something to achieve even greater things.

In the end Malcolm reflects on this case. “What gives journalism its authenticity and vitality is the tension between the subject’s blind self-absorption and the journalist’s skepticism. Journalists who swallow the subject’s account whole and publish it are not journalists but publicists.” (144) Out of everything, I think I agree most with this statement. People get so excited when they hear that journalists are interested in what they have to say, and they’re so blinded by the five seconds of fame they’ll get that they don’t realize that the story can be twisted in the way journalists want. As said in the very end, “… and still they are astonished when they see the flash of the knife.” (145)

In this day and age journalists and their credibility is extremely predominant. Yet, there’s a huge problem in today’s news. The media tends to control the narrative, which makes reporters have no hands-on experience. Anchors on news channels have a specific script that they have to follow, they must read the teleprompter, which gives them no room for candid reporting. Going off of Malcolm’s thoughts on journalism 30 years ago; some of her arguments, I think, are still relevant today. Not all journalists are authentic, some business thrive on fake news. An example I can think of is TMZ. It’s not all fake news but it’s news about celebrities and sometimes it turns out that the story is wrong or simply irrelevant. In other more serious channels like NBC, ABC, CNN, etc. when they report about politics, for example, news has to be accurate for the public. During election day, when President Donald Trump was tweeting, I noticed that some of his tweets had a warning that what he said may be wrong. This way they fact check everything, so the audience has the right information. News spreads like a forest fire and the way small businesses and big media news channels go about is articulating the story to everyone in the world. Reporting false news and lying to the public seems illegal. Malcolm has the right idea about how journalism should work, but nothing is as it seems.