Sensational Journalism

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1. Introduction

It’s Friday, August 28, 1835. You’ve just sat down to find in the New York Sun this mysterious and somewhat amazing revelation:

We counted three parties of these creatures, of twelve, nine and fifteen in each, walking erect toward a small wood. Certainly they were like human beings for their wings had now disappeared and their attitude in walking was both direct and dignified. (The Great Moon Hoax n.d.)

Perhaps, you wonder, a dramatic sighting of rare and mysterious creatures in an unexplored, even as yet unknown, part of the world? Whatever this story means, it has certainly caught your attention and you’re going to buy tomorrow’s paper to read the fifth installment of the six-part series to see what happens next. And that is the only point that matters for the editors of the newspaper. Welcome to the world of journalistic sensationalism. In this course, you will learn the historical roots of sensationalism and when the motivations can take on much darker impulses than trying, rather innocently, to fool the public. You will also understand the conditions necessary for sensationalism to be effective, and its profound impact on the standards and practice of journalism.

2. Sensational vs. sensationalism

After reading this section, you will be able to identify the differences between a sensational story and one that has been deliberately sensationalized. There is nothing new about storytellers either succumbing to the temptations of exaggeration or about desperate publishers focused on their bottom line. But when a journalistic enterprise pursues only profit, it “has generally produced sensationalism, corruption and crisis for the news media” (McChesney 2013).

Arguably, the summer of 2014 produced more sensational stories than during any preceding two or three-month period in the history of journalism. Consider the news; high-definition grisly videos shared with the world showing beheadings of human beings; a passenger airliner, perhaps mistaken for a military flight, blown out of the sky and the humane recovery of the victims