

writes, "but crimes of violence, the more bizarre and blood-soaked the better, were the journal's lifeblood."

Fox's formula proved to have broad appeal. Circulation of the New York-oriented weekly soared to 150,000. The *Gazette* was to be found wherever men congregated—at saloons, hotels, liveries, and barber shops. The lesson of the *Gazette*'s success, Gorn says, was not lost on the publishers and editors of daily newspapers. By the 1890s, many of them were packaging the news "as a series of melodramas and atrocities, of titillating events covered as spectacles, complete with illustrations."

Fox had sensed the enormous potential audience among the wage earners of the Gilded Age. To workers seeking escape from dull jobs—or just relief from the Victorian ethos—his *Gazette* offered vicarious excitement.

The *Gazette* had its critics, however. In it and its competitors, complained Anthony Comstock, founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, "we . . . have a thing so foul that no child can look upon it and be as pure afterward." He called on parents to keep "vile and crime-full illustrated papers" out of their homes and to boycott stores that sold them. Comstock, who had the backing of J. P. Morgan and other prominent figures, gave the illustrated papers "too much credit for polluting American life,"



A lurid racism was a Gazette staple. Chinese-Americans were shown "luring even little girls into their dens . . . and, after stupefying them with opium candy, debauching the poor creatures."

Gorn believes. Still, he adds, Comstock had a point. "The moral universe he and his friends grew up in was beginning to fall apart."

Out of Context

"TV's Talking Headaches" by Janet Steele, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (July-Aug. 1992), 700 Journalism Bldg., Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. 10027.

During the Persian Gulf War and its Desert Shield prelude, TV news filled the airwaves with "talking heads"—retired colonels, erstwhile government officials, and think-tank gurus. In the space of eight months, 188 such worthies made 843 appearances on network

news programs. Rarely, however, were the specialists asked "to provide background, context, or analysis," laments Steele, a University of Virginia communications professor. All that television journalists wanted was "a never-ending supply of predictions."

Talk-Show Nation

Carl Bernstein, celebrated for his *Washington Post* reporting on Watergate, casts a surprisingly jaundiced eye on today's news media in the *New Republic* (June 8, 1992).

Our actual work in uncovering the Watergate story was rooted in the most basic kind of empirical police reporting. We relied more on shoe leather and common sense and respect for the truth than anything else. . . . We did our work far from the enchanting world of the rich and the famous and the powerful. . . .

*In retrospect, the Nixon administration's extraordinary campaign to undermine the credibility of the press succeeded to a remarkable extent, despite all the post-Watergate posturing in our profession. It succeeded in large part because of our own obvious shortcomings. . . . For more than 15 years now we have been moving away from real journalism toward the creation of a sleazoid info-tainment culture in which the lines between Oprah and Phil and Geraldo and Diane and even Ted, between the *New York Post* and *Newsday*, are too often indistinguishable. In this new culture of journalistic titillation, we teach our readers and our viewers that the trivial is significant, that the lurid and the loopy are more important than*

real news. We do not serve our readers and viewers, we pander to them. And we condescend to them, giving them what we think they want and what we calculate will sell and boost ratings and readership. Many of them, sadly, seem to justify our condescension. . . . Still, it is the role of journalists to challenge people, not merely to amuse them.

*We are in the process of creating, in sum, what deserves to be called the idiot culture. . . . For the first time in our history the weird and the stupid and the coarse are becoming our cultural norm, even our cultural ideal. . . . Even The *New York Times* has been reduced to naming the rape victim in the Willie Smith case; to putting Kitty Kelley on the front page as a news story; to parlaying polls as if they were policies. . . .*

The failures of the press have contributed immensely to the emergence of a talk-show nation, in which public discourse is reduced to ranting and raving and posturing. We now have a mainstream press whose news agenda is increasingly influenced by this netherworld. On the day that Nelson Mandela returned to Soweto and the allies of World War II agreed to the unification of Germany, the front pages of many "responsible" newspapers were devoted to the divorce of Donald and Ivana Trump. . . .

Thus, on February 5, 1991, ABC's Peter Jennings asked former Pentagon aide Anthony Cordesman: "What is the best the U.S. can hope for from the B-52 campaign against the Republican Guard? . . . Can the Iraqis confuse the U.S. on the ground? . . . Can the Iraqis get themselves back together again a couple of weeks after taking this kind of attack?" Such questions were not irrelevant, Steele says, but the specialists "were almost never asked to put events in a broad historical context," which would have helped viewers understand how and why they happened. Instead, the TV news legions were intent upon "illustrating, expanding, and explaining" what one producer called "the picture of the moment."

Some questions were, if not irrelevant, unanswerable (e.g., What's going on in the mind of Saddam Hussein?). That did not prevent television's "talking heads" from responding. ("This is a judicious political calculator who is by no means irrational, but dangerous to the ex-

treme," said one pundit.)

The most important service rendered by the specialists, Steele concludes, was to help TV create "an atmosphere of gravity and authority" on its news programs. The talking heads provided, as one critic put it, "the illusion of depth."

TV news organizations, Steele argues, were more interested in creating that illusion than in real depth. They seldom ventured outside the familiar precincts of Washington and New York to find their talking heads. They frequently failed to identify fully the specialists they did put on the air, or to warn viewers of any axes being ground. And in some cases, TV news organizations featured specialists whose expertise was open to question. One of TV's Middle East "experts," for instance, did not speak Arabic and had written "nothing of consequence" on the region. But she had spent time there and had numerous contacts. For television, that was enough.