

Busy readers are forced to “skim through paragraphs of secondary fluff to get to the point of the thing. For the crisp and reliable imparting of important and necessary information, the style leaves everything to be desired because it invites muzziness, confusion, and imprecision.”

“Obviously,” says Kramer, narrative journalism should be done only by reporters and editors who have “the knack” for it. But even

some talented writers can’t resist the temptation to turn messy realities into compelling stories by reordering events or inventing details, observes Anthony DeCurtis, a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*. “The industry’s nasty little secret, unfortunately, is that editors often look the other way, or even encourage such embellishment. . . . Those same editors are, of course, shocked—shocked!—when scandal breaks out.”

Fearful Confusion

“Risky Business: Vividness, Availability, and the Media Paradox” by John Ruscio, in *Skeptical Inquirer* (Mar.–Apr. 2000), 944 Deer Dr., N.E., Albuquerque, N.M. 87122.

Do more Americans die each year from (a) shark attacks or (b) falling airplane parts? Remembering the movie *Jaws* (1975) and news accounts of various incidents involving homicidal sharks, most people would probably answer (a). The correct answer, however, is (b). Falling airplane parts get nowhere near the publicity but kill 30 times as many people in an average year. Ruscio, a social psychologist at Elizabethtown College,

Pennsylvania, says this illustrates a larger truth: The mass media give us a warped sense of life’s hazards.

In part, this is because of the nature of “news”: Man bites dog, not dog bites man. (Shark bites man is another story.) Seeking out the unusual to captivate readers or viewers, the news media then do their best to make their accounts vivid, emphasizing concrete details and the personal and emotional aspects of the story. Precisely because the accounts are vivid, Ruscio points out, they tend to stick in readers’ and viewers’ minds, available for ready recall later. “A news report will leave a more lasting impression by documenting one individual’s personal suffering than by providing a scientific argument based on ‘mere statistics.’”

The likely cumulative result, he says, is a distorted picture in our minds of the risks we face. In a widely cited 1979 study, college students were asked to rank 30 technologies and activities according to their danger. The students deemed nuclear power most dangerous, even though specialists in risk assessment put it 20th on the list, less hazardous than riding a bicycle. That same year, a much publicized (albeit nonfatal) accident occurred at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in



The calm pair in Robert LaDuke’s Smoke (1998) seem to have correctly gauged their risk of being hit by the airplane.

Pennsylvania. Twenty years later, with people's memories refreshed by media "anniversary" stories, observes Ruscio, a professor declined a job offer from his own Elizabethtown College because the professor's spouse feared living so close to Three Mile Island.

With effort, Ruscio notes, individuals can develop critical habits of mind that protect against media fearmongering. Unfortunately, he adds, that offers scant protection against "ill-advised *policy* decisions" by government in response to popular, media-generated misconceptions.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Why Study Religious History?

"The Failure of American Religious History" by D. G. Hart, in *The Journal of the Historical Society* (Spring 2000), 656 Beacon St., Mezzanine, Boston, Mass. 02215–2010.

Trying in recent decades to make their discipline more relevant and academically respectable, religious historians have ended up trivializing it, argues Hart, a professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

"The past three decades have witnessed a great expansion of non-Protestant academic studies of religion," he says, "but no serious engagement of the fundamental intellectual question of what religion is doing in the academy."

EXCERPT

The Enlightenment 'Project'

In recent decades it has become fashionable to condescend to the Enlightenment as the world of unworldly pamphleteers foolishly wedded to the theory of progress, unhistorical in its contempt for the past and committed to a cold, prosaic rationalism. . . . Nowadays, when someone speaks of the "Enlightenment project," a term that instantly reveals its user's partisanship—we know that this is a way of pronouncing the whole enterprise a failure.

Counter-arguments, no matter how soundly grounded, have not helped much. Anyone who cares to read the major texts of the Enlightenment, whether British or American or Continental, can recognize the injustice of these charges: The theory of progress [for example] was a 19th-century speciality, whereas Voltaire wrote his poem on the Lisbon earthquake and Candide to ridicule the theory of perfectibility....

Still, the question remains: was all the philosophes' expenditure of energy worth it? Their attack on unreason was principally directed against the ravages that religious beliefs and religious practices had wrought through the centuries. Once the truth about the fallibility of the Bible and the absurdity of accepting childish fairy tales as revelations had been established, they hoped, the way to a more reasonable, less heartless, life would be open. No doubt, the philosophes' confidence in the healing powers of reason was excessive. We have learned that secular tyrannies can be as murderous as religious ones, and that philistinism can flourish amid universal literacy. . . . And yet reason is always better than irrationality, moderation always better than fanaticism, liberalism always better than authoritarianism. If the three are bound to fail, or at least to be compromised in the clash of opinion and self-interest, these enlightened principles remain the only acceptable prescriptions for human, and humane, survival.

—Peter Gay, the noted historian whose works include *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (1966–69), in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Oct. 6, 2000)