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Everyday Consequences of Terministic Screens

Terministic screens are used to select and deflect information, often dictating the opinions of those exposed to the story. In class, we talked about how terministic screens are used in the stories of our heroes, especially those we are taught about in school. What information is left out? What is being emphasized and why? I found it a very interesting concept and started to discover them being used outside of the classroom, in everyday life. Right as we were learning about terministic screens, my High School made local news when 30 students were suspended for participating in a Harlem Shake video. I was very shocked when I first heard about the incident; I had yet to see the video and I had only heard the story through my friends, therefore I thought that the punishments were unfair and just another incident of the principal abusing his power. My opinions quickly changed once the story hit local news, shortly followed by coverage nationally. Even a week after the incident, I heard different stories from different sources, and using my knowledge from class, I was able to see the selecting and deflecting of information by each source, all to get a certain reaction from the public. This is when I realized, in everyday life, terministic screens can change our opinions and therefore alter the consequences we think others deserve, even in what seems like one's harmless participation in a viral YouTube video.

All of my original information had come from my peers: people I graduated with, friends still in high school, and the mom who loves to gossip down the street. I got calls and texts galore asking if I had heard that the group of seniors had all been suspended for a week because the principal is a jerk. I had no trouble believing this, seeing as I had the same principal for my senior year; it was his first year with our school and decided he had to make some “changes.” These changes included police surrounding the school so seniors could not “prank” anybody, followed by a complete makeover to our spirit week, which resulted in no infamous senior toga day because it could be seen as “offensive;” this Harlem Shake thing seemed to just be another way the principal could abuse his power.

Because what everyone had told me seemed to be all there was to it, I never even thought to go watch the video for myself. I had heard all about it and agreed with the kids—without having even seen the video. Just a day later, my mom called me to tell me to turn on channel 2. That was the first time I saw the video. All of the boys in it were half naked, dancing inappropriately, one of the kids was holding a live duck, and they were all in a school classroom. At this point I began to see the reason for their punishment. This was the first time I recognized the selection and deflection of information by those telling the story. Although if I had done the research on my own, I would have been able to fill in a lot of the blanks by myself, the fact that some people simply told the story as some kids just having fun, not necessarily breaking any rules, and getting suspended because of it really made me realize that I need to be more careful about what I believe. Just because one of my friends decides to tell me that something is the way it is, does not mean that it is true.

Just to hear differently from students and the news was one thing, but what struck me the most was the difference of the information coming from local news compared to national news.

When I watched the local news report, I knew why the kids were suspended, but I still thought that the length of the suspension might have been a bit too much. Some of the students involved lost scholarships, were suspended from sports, and lost their spots in National Honors Society (NHS). Coming from Milford, I was well aware that there were worse things going on daily than a group of guys deciding to participate in a silly video, but for whatever reason this incident was important enough to suspend students for three to five days. An interesting thing that I noticed about the local news was that they interviewed the suspended students personally, along with their friends and family. One interview with the students that was broadcasted on television even involved the newscaster dancing *with* the boys, obviously making a statement that what they did was harmless. The first few days that the local news was covering this story, the school was not making comments about the incident, so the majority of the information the local news stations were using came from the kids themselves. But, news travels fast. Looking back at the news articles I read at the time, I cannot find some of the statements I had read originally. Many of the stories are now actually much shorter and more concise, only containing statements like “More than 20 students have been suspended from Milford High School after recording their own YouTube version of the popular dance the ‘Harlem Shake’” (WXYZ.com web staff). This is very different from the long articles that they had prior to the story’s national cover, which contained many more quotes by the students and no statements from the school.

On the other hand, National news approached this controversy differently from the very beginning. The focus never seemed to be put on how well-behaved the kids were. Instead, simple factual statements were made. We could see this just by looking at the title of the article, like in the New York Daily, whose title was “Michigan high school suspends 30 students for Harlem Shake video on YouTube using live bird,” followed by the statement, “The clip made by

students of Milford High School in suburban Detroit also features them stripped down to their underwear and simulating oral sex; Officials say they violated several rules in the student code of conduct” (Moran). Another interesting thing to note was that national news did not have as easy access to the kids as local news did. Because of this, there were no new interviews with the kids. The only quote from a student that was used by the New York Daily was from an article that was written in the Oakland Press a few days earlier. Instead, the national news focused more on the school’s statements about the case. At the time these statements were unique to the national coverage, but as I mentioned earlier, the local news did edit their original articles, making them much more factual and similar to the national news now. The last major difference I noticed from the national news was that they made a definite claim about there being a second video, and how the boys gained access to the room. “A second video produced by the boys, which allegedly had ‘racially insensitive portions,’ was also uploaded to YouTube,” stated Moran in his article, followed by, “Milford High School, in Oakland County’s Highland Township, took the drastic action because they said the boys lied to gain access to the classroom.” Although we can now find some mention of the second video in some of the local news articles, it still seems to be emphasized more in the nation articles. On the other hand, the mention of the students lying to gain access to the classroom is still only brushed upon, if mentioned at all in these local articles. Needless to say, after gaining more knowledge from the national news, my opinions changed drastically. With all of this new information, I believed (and still do believe) that the boys deserved their punishments. They decided to lie to gain access to a classroom to inappropriately dance with a live animal, while all being half naked. I think it is very interesting that the same story, with different information selected and deflected, changed my opinions about the kids so

drastically. It makes me wonder what other things I would think differently about if I only got information from another source.

I was not the only one influenced by the different structure and the different emphasized information in these articles. Diverse reactions could be seen in the comments of the online articles. “The punishment nowhere near fits the crime; I wouldn’t even be mad at my kid if they got suspended for this, I would be angry with the school,” comments Michael Alan Ray on clickondetroit.com (*Clickondetroit*). Other comments on the article contained a similar trend, stating that the kids were just having fun and that they really did not hurt anybody. In contrast, comments made on national articles seemed to have a different interpretation. “Down right stupid is my thought; if they broke the rules, then they should be punished- it’s that simple,” stated someone under the username of DENTON in the New York Daily article (Moran). Similar comments followed, mostly agreeing that the punishments were well deserved and that the students were dumb for doing this video.

I could easily expect at least a little variety of the story from each source, but the dynamic of local vs. national news shocked me. The contrast between the comments on the articles really emphasized the prevalence and influence of the different information that was selected and deflected for the articles. It would be very easy to say that it was just a coincidence and people commented differently on each article just because. But I do not think this was the case. This led me to question- what were the motives behind these differences?

The most compelling argument I could find was the time difference between the local and the national news. Local news was the first to cover the story; therefore they only had limited information. As I mentioned earlier, the school was not making any comments about the situation at first. It was not until the story began to be covered nationally that the school spoke

up. Just the thought of the school's motivation behind this was interesting. It makes sense that they did not want to make a big deal out of the situation when the story was only being covered locally, especially because it is expected that people do not like anyone that punishes their friends or family. But, as soon as the story went national, the school had to stand up for themselves, or else they would have been looked down upon by people all across the country. This really says something about the idea of our image/identity in our society- that a school would not care as much about what their students and other local schools think about them, but care about their image to those hearing the story nationally. Either way, timing had a big impact on this story. This is evident because soon after the national news reported the school's statements and people learned that the students lied to gain access to the room and that there was in fact a second video, most news stations stopped covering the story right away. I have also seen that many of the stations that were playing the story up from the very beginning, shortened their articles to make them much more factual, leaving out personal interviews and most of the information that they received from the kids.

Similar to how the school wanted to look a certain way for the country, I believe the local news stations wanted to appeal to those who were going to be reading their articles. Since their articles were going to be read by people in and around my hometown, I believe that the local news wanted to give them something that would make them happy. In this case, many people reading these local news articles were friends and families of the students who were suspended. None of them would have been happy to read a local newspaper that was telling them that their children deserved their punishment and should stop complaining. If that was how they went about writing the article, it would probably receive a lot of negative feedback. Instead, they included how good the boys were and decided to deflect some of their wrongdoings, as in

breaking into the classroom, to appeal to their audience. I was able to recognize this more after learning about it in class. Audience is *key* when writing an article or a story.

This statement made me realize that everything is not what it seems to be. After finally getting a more complete and straight up factual story from the National news, I realized that the punishments were actually well-deserved and necessary. This then made me think back to the decisions the principal made during my senior year that seemed so unfair and pointless. I have to remember that just by listening to my peers, I cannot expect to hear the full story. For all I know, some student at my high school could have taken offense to this tradition at our school, as togas have been a part of different cultures and our mockery of them could be taken the wrong way. Of course there was always the issue that people decided not to wear clothes under their togas, which could have created a whole new issue in and of itself. From this I have learned that even though every person has their own biases, we must recognize that they are there and listen to multiple sources before thinking we have the complete story. We could very well never have the complete story, but we must keep our minds open and think of other people's perspectives before jumping to conclusions about anything, because for all we know, a story of one's seemingly harmless participation in a viral YouTube video may be much more than what meets the eye.

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