

Frontline Essay

Truth is but a perspective, and that perspective is adjusted by the various organisations that present us with these 'truths.'

This is evident in the ABC's television series produced by Rob Sitch, Santo Cilauro, Jane Kennedy and Tom Gleissner, Frontline. Frontline, along with the Simpson's episode The Computer Wore Menace Shoes and Michael Mann's film, The Insider, all help to show us how perspectives alter truths.

In an episode from Frontline, "The Siege," the team uses visual images, sensationalism and various other questionable techniques to shape what the viewer sees. The cops have placed a 5km exclusion zone around the siege site but in order for Frontline's reporter Martin de Stasio to look in danger they use tight framing of him crouching in front of a police car at night. This incident is further blown out of proportion by Mike Moore's constant reminders that Marty is in the "line of fire" and he signs off with Marty by saying "keep safe."

Another of Frontline's reporters, Brooke Van der Burg, asks the mother of the man involved in the siege to send an emotional message to him. She then asks her to cry 'on camera' again. The Frontline team also try to get an expert in child psychology on the show but when that fails they get a uni student and "shove him in front of a bookcase."

This episode has comparisons drawn between it and the Simpson's episode, The Computer Wore Menace Shoes. Just like in "The Siege," the issues are exaggerated and sensationalised using humour.

When Mr Burns is preparing to sell uranium to terrorists, Smithers asks him whether he is ready for the "secret meeting." Burns goes further to describe the incident as "pure journalistic dynamite." When Homer is watching the actual transaction he states that "I love spying."

The influence of the media on people's perspectives is also highlighted in the text when, just seconds after Homer posts the story on his web page, Mr Burns is seen being dragged away by two FBI agents.

The other way in which these two texts link is the way in which they portray addiction to ratings. In "The Siege," Brian stands on a table reading out the ratings for the previous night's episode. This is comparable to Homer sitting at his computer late at night waiting for his site to receive hits. After Homer ironically wins the Pulitzer Prize, his identity as the mysterious Mr X is lost and so the town's people no longer trust him with incriminating information. He then begins to make up news and his attitude is shown by the hypocritical quote, "real news is great, but I'm getting a thousand hits an hour with grade-A ballplop."

Even after he starts spreading fake stories such as 'Spanish and Italian are the same language,' the people of Springfield still believe his stories and this shows the influence of the media on society's perspectives.

A second episode of the Frontline series is "Smaller Fish to Fry." Intertextuality is used at the beginning of the episode as "Media Watch" attacks Frontline for not taking on the "big fish." When Mike tells Brian that dodgy fridge repair men who rip people off \$80 is not big news, Brian replies without explanation "but multiply that by a thousand." Mike then attempts to go after a "big fish" by discovering a bank fraud case that has extorted millions of dollars. Mike's bumbling attempt at sourcing for the story is a parody of Woodward and Bernstein's famous Watergate exclusive.

Despite being told initially to run the story, it is pulled from upstairs due to legal reasons. As Brian puts, "fraud is a difficult piece."

As a result of this Mike demands that the story goes to air. All of a sudden, Mike is threatened with a smear campaign that includes a sexual harassment case and theft. The impending

threat against Mike is enhanced by the way in which the network's managing director imposes himself over Mike and speaks in a low, serious tone against a red backdrop.

This can be compared to Michael Mann's 1999 film based on actual events. The Insider is a story of one man, Jeffrey Wigand who, like the senior administrative officer in the bank in Frontline, has evidence that could bring down a corporate giant.

In the 1980's, the "seven dwarves" of big tobacco testified under oath that their nicotine products were not addictive. Wigand had, on the other hand, been a scientist working for tobacco giant Brown & Williamson and knew that cigarettes were engineered using ammonia chemistry to be a "nicotine delivery device."

In this instance, the CBS TV program "60 Minutes" wanted to air an interview with Wigand telling disclosing all this but couldn't due to a restraining order on Wigand. The producer of "60 Minutes", Lowell Bergman is the one who asked Wigand to testify and he does everything in his power to release the information.

Brown & Williamson use smear campaigns, gag orders, confidentiality agreements, death threats and prosecution to keep Wigand from talking. These actions against Wigand are made very threatening by Mann through his use of suspenseful non-diegetic music and startling electronic noises combined with an eerie neo noir. Michael Mann also includes his signature style for danger, shaky shots. Whenever Wigand is in danger, the camera begins to shake violently.

The CBS news network could also be sued for 'tortious interference' and this would put a spanner in the works for the sale of CBS by Tisch to Westinghouse.

In one particular mis-en-scene, we see Wigand's face through a grainy video screen and this reinforces what the film is all about, getting information to the public. As Bergman points out, the case is the "biggest public health issue in American history" but pressure from upstairs, just like in Frontline, prevent it from being aired. The perspective that the media can impose is huge and Bergman alludes to this when he states that "our standards have to be higher than everybody else because we are the standard for everybody else." As a lawyer for CBS correctly points out, when it comes to Wigand's interview, the "greater the truth, the greater the damage."

The third episode from Frontline is "This Night of Nights." Just like in The Insider, a story is pulled because of financial interests.

Mike wants to do a story on Telstra taping customer's phone calls without their permission but it is pulled because Telstra is a big financial supporter of the network. Just like in The Insider, by running the story they are putting at risk huge amounts of money. "Unlimited chequebooks" can have a large impact on truth.

So, as a result of not being able to attack Telstra, they endorse them and this shows how money can have a big impact on what the viewer is presented with as truth.

So, as each of these texts have shown through their representation of differing perspectives of truth, it is clear that what the viewer sees as truth is simply based on the perspectives the media apply.