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The limits of 'man bites dog' stories

The usual notion of big news is the unusual. Journalists are taught to look for "man bites dog" stories – the events that raise eyebrows and make us think, "Wow!" News of the ordinary also makes the cut in media outlets, of course, but it's not what sizzles, and it's not apt to get onto front pages or prime-time broadcasts. A simple rejoinder to the media status quo is that what we really need are more "dog bites man" and "dog bites woman" stories. For every spectacular event, there are many others – just as terrible or just as wonderful – that barely register on the media Richter scale because they're happening all the time. What's earthshaking in people's lives is often barely visible to the hype-hungry media eye.

But journalism has the challenge of simultaneously tracking what's usual and unusual. One complication is that important ongoing realities may occasionally receive a lot of attention as a result of media whim. A certain social ill might suddenly get a burst of national publicity because editors at the New York Times decided to make it a page-one news feature.

The fly-on-the-wall conceits of reporters can distort our understanding of what's happening in the world. For instance, even though media coverage often skews political developments rather than merely depicting them, journalists routinely adhere to the pretense that they are just observing dramatic events from off-stage.

The division of labor between journalists and politicians, in fact, is more apparent than real. Both are shaping public perceptions. Both directly affect the likelihood of electoral victory and defeat. Neither is inclined to openly acknowledge that they need each other to ply their trades. And in general, to a large extent, both are slurping their livelihoods from the same corporate troughs.

Fifteen years ago, the essayist Walter Karp observed: "The news media in America do not tell the American people that a political whip hangs over their head. That is because a political whip hangs over their head." Writing in the July 1989 edition of Harper's magazine, he offered an assessment that is no less relevant – and no more palatable – today.

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"In the American republic the fact of oligarchy is the most dreaded knowledge of all, and our news keeps that knowledge from us," Karp wrote. "By their subjugation of the press, the political powers in America have conferred on themselves the greatest of political blessings – Gyges' ring of invisibility. And they have left the American people more deeply baffled by their own country's politics than any people on earth. Our public realm lies steeped in twilight, and we call that twilight news."

Yet not all corporate-minded functionaries are alike. The range of discourse and debate in news media, woefully constricted, is still meaningful. While frequently pathetic with a GOP-friendly approach, the Democratic members of Congress collectively represent a somewhat different set of constituencies and interests than the Republicans running the legislative and executive branches. To a theorist – particularly, for instance, one who is personally insulated from poverty – the difference might be negligible. To someone living in a family dependent on, say, income from the legal minimum wage, the specific policies in effect under the American system of oligarchy can make a substantial difference.

It's not unusual for the economic system of the USA to take the lives of people simply because they don't have the money to pay for medical care, nutrition or a roof over their heads. It happens all the time, and it's rarely news. At the moment, this may be the season to be jolly, but countless Americans will be braving the cold overnight for want of cold cash. It's not unusual – in fact, it's part of what makes this country not so great.

The dogs of top-down class war keep biting men – as well as women and children. Those humans shouldn't need to bite back before such daily realities are newsworthy.

And, as a practical matter, journalists are part of the story. Their reporting decisions can shift the public view, if only momentarily. They shouldn't wait for some flashy or unusual event before proclaiming a Really Big Story. The momentous news about the typical is right in front of us, every day, hidden in plain sight.

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