

# *Media Myths and Miracles*

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I am grateful for my wife, here on the stand with me, giving me her constant support. She really is my hero. I'm grateful for family members and friends who have shared with me the weight of saying something valuable to you during our time together.

I'm also thankful for colleagues from the College of Fine Arts and Communications, who also are seated on the stand and in the front rows of this assembly. I appreciate their support. They are a remarkably talented, intelligent, and disciplined group. It is a great privilege to be counted among their number.

A couple of weeks ago Dean Paul Cox and I were having lunch with a prospective student and his father. We were dining in the Museum of Art cafe when Dean Cox told this student that biology was the world's oldest profession. Dean Cox explained that when the Lord put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to care for it, he created the world's first biologists. He added that in doing so the Lord was also the first equal opportunity employer.

Since the student was interested in coming to BYU to study biology, I didn't interrupt the good dean to let him know that other colleges have laid claim to having older professions than his.

The dean of the College of Nursing, Sandra Rogers, could argue that when the Lord took the rib from Adam with which to make Eve, he performed an operation; therefore, medicine is the oldest profession.

Dean Douglas Smoot might take exception with both of these propositions, arguing that the Lord's creation of the heavens and the earth out of chaos was a magnificent engineering accomplishment, making his the oldest profession.

At this point, I get to put on my journalism hat and ask, "Who do you think created the chaos?"

It is about my profession, journalism (and the chaos so often attributed to it), that I would like to talk with you this morning. I want to connect my professional experiences with my religious beliefs, sharing what I've learned about both in my thirty years of working in the media.

My objectives are to

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- define a context for you, by which to better understand the role of the press in a democratic society.
  - identify some myths created by the media, promoted by the father of all lies.
  - compare and contrast the values of the gospel with the media myths that we see daily.
  - suggest the means by which we may use the miracles of technology to accomplish divine purposes.
- King Henry II's question to his noblemen in reference to Thomas Beckett: "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" The result was a clash of worldviews between state and church.
  - Joseph Smith's shutting down of the *Nauvoo Expositor*, which ultimately led to his martyrdom, demonstrates a clash between theocracy and democracy.
  - Accounts of wars, devastation, and human suffering triggered when one culture imposes its worldview on another or, more accurately, attempts to displace one worldview with another. We have plenty of current-day examples in these categories.

What I will say in the next few minutes compresses complex professional issues into concepts that I hope can be easily understood. Some of my colleagues may find my approach simpleminded and perhaps stereo-typical, but nonetheless it represents a summary view of my experience in the media, and its incompleteness is fully acknowledged.

I am proud of my profession and of colleagues that serve our society with the highest possible standards of personal integrity. My intent this morning is to give both those inside the media and those who are faithful members of the Church a glimpse into each other's worlds. I do so because I think each misunderstands—and therefore mistrusts—the other.

There are almost as many jokes about journalists as there are about lawyers. I share President Lee's concern about that when he says, "I am deeply offended that the entire reputation of a noble and honored profession can be sullied by two or three hundred thousand bad apples."

There are bad apples and excesses in every profession. Journalism may have more than its share (although I am not certain about that).

I perceive the biggest problem lies not in the bad apples but in an extraordinary clash between a journalist's worldview and that of a faithful Church member.

The clash of worldviews that I refer to can be seen in the following examples:

In his best-selling book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, the author John Gray helps readers grapple with gender issues by talking about differences between the way men and women think and behave as if they came from Mars and Venus, respectively.

This literary device separates one's personal investment in these differences, making it easier to recognize them when they are placed in the context of the way things are done on Mars or on Venus.

For our purposes this morning, if men are from Mars and women are from Venus, then journalists are from Pluto!

Pluto is a cold, dark, tiny, miserable place where everything is suspect. Where everybody lies. Where graft, corruption, malfeasance, self-interest, and greed reign supreme. And where the journalist's job is to tell people about all of this garbage.

Some wag said that if journalists on Pluto had a Thirteenth Article of Faith, it would read, "If there is anything hateful, despicable, shameful, or rotten, we seek after these things."

The Church's worldview, on the other hand, comes from the planet Kolob. Most of the conflict and difficulty we have with the press comes from differences between our worldview, our frame of behavioral reference, and our

cultural assumptions and those held by journalists.

The journalist's worldview is democratic. In America, a journalist enjoys an explicit, constitutionally defined, and protected role written by the Founding Fathers.

When asked what form of government the Constitutional Convention had agreed upon, Benjamin Franklin replied, "A republic, the worst of all political systems, save all others."

The Founding Fathers believed Lord Acton's statement that "absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The press plays a potent role in American democracy because it was intended to do so. It is one of the forces that the Founding Fathers balanced against the powers of government. The journalist's duty is to tell about graft, corruption, greed, and malfeasance in our society.

Journalists are trained to be junkyard watch dogs. They bark at every opportunity, justified or not. It's the best way that the Founding Fathers could find to keep us alert to what section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants explains in these words in verse 39:

*We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men, as soon as they get a little authority, as they suppose, they will immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion.*

The Church's worldview doesn't flow from democratic principles (as much as we admire the Constitution for the freedoms it provides).

Our worldview comes from our belief that the best possible government is a theocracy: "a righteous King, making righteous judgments, ruling a righteous people who live righteous lives." Such a society needs no watchdogs. In a theocracy the media will be used to disseminate pure knowledge, light, and truth! The entire society will seek that which is virtuous, lovely, or of good report.

Can you imagine how strange that world is to a journalist? Can you understand how difficult it is for these two worldviews to understand each other?

I often think about the necessary bridges to cross the chasm between my profession and my religion. How do we begin to understand each other and our very different views of the world?

Steven Covey in his book *Principle Centered Leadership* says that we must first seek to understand if we would be understood.

What do we need to know when trying to understand what it is like to be from Pluto?

- Time has a different meaning on Pluto. Everything is immediate. It's a planet full of deadlines. First and Fast are the gods worshipped there. Nothing is forever, and eternity cannot be considered. On Pluto the race is always to the swift and the battle to the strong.

An insider joke at CBS News is that if Moses handed down the Ten Commandments and it were reported on the evening news, the lead would be: "Moses came down from the mountain today with Ten Commandments written by the finger of God—the two most important of which were . . ." (Use your imaginations to fill in the blank.)

- On Pluto, provable facts are the means for determining what is relevant or valuable.

There is no place for "revealed" truth. Faith or belief cannot be admitted as legitimate means of inquiry.

- People who come from Pluto make different assumptions about authority and obedience. They have seen how authority and power corrupt. The concept of "righteous dominion" is incomprehensible to them.

In his autobiography entitled *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, Malcolm Muggeridge wrote:

*Journalists follow authority as sharks do a liner, hoping to feed off the waste it discharges, with perhaps someone occasionally falling overboard to make a meal, and once in a way the whole ship going down and providing a positive feast. [Chronicles of Wasted Time, vol. 2, The Infernal Grove (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1974), p. 39]*

- Citizens of Pluto recognize self-worth as demonstrated by rugged individualism. The accumulation of wealth and power is based on the personal freedom to do as one pleases. Obligations to community are valid only when they promote individual rights and liberties.

This affects the way someone from Pluto approaches questions of motivation. Self-interest is seen as the driving force for all human behavior. Self-sacrifice is an unbelievable concept on Pluto.

“What’s in it for you?” is the primary question of relevance on Pluto.

The answer “Nothing” is unbelievable.

Explaining your motivation as obedience to what you believe are God’s commandments results in blank stares on Pluto. Its citizens cannot grasp the idea that there is peace of mind and joy in doing so.

Those who have visited Pluto and experience its culture come back shaking their heads and report that it’s a place where “No good deed goes unpunished!”

- On Pluto, there is no expiation or forgiveness for past sins. Repentance isn’t possible. Once a crook, always a crook—even if you were a president of the United States. Computer data files provide the ability to dredge up old copy with errors never corrected in the original text.

The picture that I’ve painted for journalists can be expanded, for purposes of this discussion, to the media in general. Here, however, instead of being from Pluto, media owners and producers come from the planet Midas.

They want everything they touch to turn to gold. The driving force in their culture is making money and lots of it.

All else is secondary. All else serves the prime directive: More!

On Midas, too much is never enough. On Midas, you can buy anything for money.

On Midas, media moguls make money by creating myths that businesses use to sell their goods and services. These myths have become tools of the father of all lies. These myths lead away from truth and light and toward the mist, darkness, and shadows that father Lehi saw in his dream.

They create the large and spacious building, and from that heap scorn and ridicule on those who would hold fast to the iron rod, and they do it by twisting our most basic needs into something carnal, sensual, and devilish.

Brother Richard Wirthlin, a world-renowned public opinion expert, recently reported his company’s findings from a survey that asked the American people to identify what they value most in their lives.

Take a moment and think about your heart’s desires. What do you desire most in your life and why?

The three top categories identified by Brother Wirthlin’s survey were these: first, self-esteem (a good opinion of one’s self and one’s actions); second, peace of mind; and third, joy or happiness in one’s daily life.

Self-esteem, peace of mind, and joy or happiness. These represent what the American people want most in their lives.

Contrast the striking difference between how the gospel of Jesus Christ fulfills these needs compared with the myths created by the media. The media would have us believe that self-esteem comes from owning things, looking

and smelling good, or using the right products to make us sexually and socially attractive. The message is that self-esteem itself is a commodity that can be purchased.

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches that each of us is a child of a Heavenly Father and Mother, who love us and want us to return to their presence. As such, we have intrinsic self-worth. Our value to them is priceless.

We come from heaven, in the words of the poet, “trailing clouds of glory.”

The father of all lies wants us to believe otherwise. His purpose, in the words of Moses, is “to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will” (Moses 4:4).

Satan wants us to believe the myths created by the media. He wants us to forget about being children of heavenly parents and to believe that we can buy self-esteem by driving the right car, drinking the right soft drink, wearing the right clothes, putting on the right perfume, and eating the right food.

Media myths teach that things *external*—and not *internal* and certainly not *eternal*—are all that matter. Peace of mind comes from “following one’s bliss.” These myths categorize religion as limiting, restricting, and suffocating one’s freedom of choice.

Media myths attribute guilt, personal anguish, and suffering to a belief in God. Absolutes are made relative, and there is no center from which peace of mind can flow.

How cunning and destructive are the myths that turn reality on its head!

The liberating, mind-expanding, soul-restoring blessings that come from obeying God’s will can never be experienced by humankind as long as they believe peace of mind requires no discipline or obedience.

God leads his children beside still waters and gives them the sweet peace of mind that only comes from knowing that one willingly and lovingly obeys his commandments.

Media myths make every individual responsible for achieving his or her own joy

or happiness. Their messages focus on individual preeminence. These myths create and perpetuate the Me Generation. They create the idea that we must be constantly entertained, that anything that fails to immediately capture our attention is (according to my fifteen-year-old son, Jesse) b-o-r-i-n-g! These myths make self-gratification the ultimate source of joy or happiness.

How far from the truth they are!

The paradox of life is that service to others is the wellspring of joy and happiness. In all human interaction nothing is so rewarding or fulfilling as genuine service to someone other than oneself. It is a fundamental aspect of family life—fathers and mothers sacrificing for their children. It is an eternal pattern, learned from heavenly role models.

God has defined the context whereby we might have joy in this life, and joy will never be found in the self-indulgent, rapacious myths created for us in the media.

You can see how different the media myths are from the gospel’s message to our Father’s children. Our natural desire for self-esteem, peace of mind, and joy and happiness are being used by Satan to make us insecure, bitter, and miserable—just like him.

If all that I’ve said about the media this morning is true, and I believe that it is, you might reasonably ask why in the world would I continue to work in it?

When President Lyndon Johnson signed the Public Broadcasting Act into law in 1967, he said that our society’s greatest challenge is to learn to “manage our miracles.”

This year the Church will have about 400,000 convert baptisms. That’s about how many people are born on the planet each day. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to calculate that we are falling behind in our efforts to reach all of God’s children, despite dramatic growth in Church membership.

How is the Church to meet the mandate in section 90 of the Doctrine and Covenants that

states: “Every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language, through those who are ordained unto this power, by the administration of the Comforter” (D&C 90:11).

Elder M. Russell Ballard has said that the means of achieving this objective requires us to harness the miracles of the media to effectively communicate, in his words, “the greatest message ever revealed, which is that Jesus is the Christ, that we’re all sons and daughters of God, and that if we are faithful we will be able to return to him” (Minutes of Church Public Communications Advisory Committee, 19 August 1994).

Gordon Bowen, former chief creative officer of the advertising agency McCann Erickson Worldwide, told the faculty and students in our college last Thursday that we must be as effective as the devil in getting our message to Heavenly Father’s children.

Brother Bowen’s message echoes that of President Kimball’s given from this podium nearly twenty years ago, issuing the challenge for us to create the ways and the means to communicate the gospel in all of its glory.

Managing our miracles is up to us.

On a recent consulting assignment, one of our team members, Peter Schutz (former president and CEO of Porsche), in talking about our ability to sense the environment around us, said, “We’re not certain who first discovered water, but we’re pretty sure that it wasn’t the fish.”

Watching last week’s broadcast of the CLIO awards for outstanding television commercials, I was astounded when the presenter said that the average American viewer sees 250 such messages every day and that by the time an American child reaches age twenty-five, he or she will have seen more than two million television commercials.

We swim in a media environment, making us largely oblivious to its effects on our behavior.

The promises of the electronic super highway and interactive media leading to virtual-reality experiences for us and our children require the utmost attention.

The best things perverted become the worst.

Miracles of technology and the messages they convey can be what E. B. White called “A saving radiance in the sky;” or they can become the mind-numbing, values-distorting experiences desired by the adversary.

The owners and operators of our media miracles bear a particular burden for their use. One year ago last September, my wife and I were in Rome attending a worldwide conference of the heads of broadcasting networks.

Our group of about 150 media executives was invited to Castel Gandolfo, the Pope’s summer palace just outside of Rome along the Appian Way. We gathered in a small palace courtyard and listened to Pope John Paul’s admonition to use the media for better purposes than merely making money. These are his words:

*Precisely because the Church is deeply concerned for man and his needs, including those needs that remain unexpressed, she desires to direct the attention of those working in communications to ideals that are at once more lofty and more worthy of man. The Church appreciates the tremendous possibilities offered by the communications media, but she is not convinced that they have to be used as poorly as they sometimes are. For this reason she encourages all efforts to improve not only the technical and artistic quality of radio and television, but also and more importantly, its human quality.*

Pope John Paul then went on to say:

*The Church appeals to the consciences of individuals employed in social communications and likewise to government leaders and all those to whom radio and television programs are directed. She asks them to make every effort to demand higher quality radio*

*and television programs. Audiences should not be seen as simply the passive recipients of messages that all too often tend to manipulate and exploit.*

What an extraordinary message, given to the world's most influential and powerful broadcasters and given in terms that were unmistakably clear!

What a remarkable experience for me, because earlier that same September, Elder James E. Faust said almost the same thing in his BYU fireside address here in the Marriott Center. Elder Faust told us that we are responsible for our media choices and that we must take great care in making them.

Other General Authorities have counseled care in our selections of music, film, television and radio programs, and reading material. They see where the deep water is and give clear signals about its danger to us and our families.

Managing the media miracles in our lives is a daily challenge—one that can be made easier if we understand the role and nature of journalism in our democratic society; if we recognize the myths the media create that lead us away from self-esteem, peace of mind, and joy; and if we are willing take personal responsibility for how media is used in our homes and in our society.

In other words, to be effective in managing media miracles you must:

First, learn how the media functions in our society, understand its purposes and how it influences our lives. Blaming the media is not a solution. Understanding it is.

Second, commit yourself to effectively communicating the principles of the gospel through every means available to you. While your chosen profession may not be communications or the arts associated with creating messages to be delivered through the media, you are not powerless to control the media that you use or to influence its content.

And finally, prayerfully follow the counsel of the Brethren about the media and how it should be used.

I believe in a kind and loving Heavenly Father and Mother who want nothing but the best for me as one of their spiritual offspring. I sustain the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and acknowledge their importance in my life and in the intellectual and spiritual lives of all who attend this university.

It is my prayer that we will have the faith, the wisdom, and the will to build God's kingdom, making us and our society one that would be welcome on the planet Kolob. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.