

opinion/editorial

Blood, guts stories overlook rare reporting opportunity

A story like the one in Guyana is thankfully a rare occurrence, but it presents a rare opportunity for press coverage.

It is too bad the press didn't take advantage of the opportunity it had in covering the past week's events in Guyana.

The coverage of mass suicides and the return of the bodies to the United States was an exercise in excess and overuse.

I. kent wolgamott

Nearly every story from Guyana described the stench of death, decaying bodies and so on, even though the facts were known by anyone in the world who had contact with the media.

If the excess in print and by spoken word on radio was troubling, the visual overkill of television reached an ultimate.

Film of the Jonestown village of the Peoples Temple was repeatedly shown, an aerial shot of the compound moving into a shot of the bodies on the ground, then to the soldiers working to get the bodies into caskets and onto the planes.

The reporter then would treat us to the latest body count before repeating the same story that was presented the night before.

Crucial questions lost

Repetition was the order of the day for print as well, with entire stories repeated after a new fact has been presented.

And, lost somewhere in the blood and guts stories were the most crucial questions presented by the tragic events.

Forgotten in most stories was the death of Rep. Leo Ryan and the journalists who were killed in the prelude to the suicides.

The funerals of the men were covered and tributary biographies appeared, but few in the press attempted to go beyond the surface of Ryan's trip to South America and discuss both the unusual methods used by the congressman and their success in the past, the reasons why they were em-

ploied and the real reasons Ryan was in Guyana and the ramifications of the visit.

The entire question of 'cults' also has received only lip service treatment from the press.

We have learned all about what the Peoples Temple is or was, the intricacies of Rev. Jim Jones' life and something about temple members.

But, once again, the media has missed the major point.

Cult growth

Few attempts have been made to discuss the growth of cults in the country, beyond the customary mention of the Unification Church, Hare Krishna and Scientology.

We have seen little about motivation to join these organizations and about future Jim Jones' throughout the country.

Rather we get customary repetition of familiar facts, taking the easy way out.

This should not be misinterpreted to say that the story and its developments should not have been covered on a daily in-depth basis, for they should have.

However, the coverage we received was traditional on a story which deserved more innovative and thoughtful press.

The untold minutes of air-time devoted to repeat showings of film could have been better used to look at the problem behind the event.

Discuss the 'why'

The inches of news columns devoted to repeating known facts and statistics could have been used to discuss why the events in Guyana happened, not merely how.

A journalist covering religion should use this opportunity to discuss the various ramifications of situations similar to the Peoples Temple across the country.

Instead, we are getting customary pieces of journalism which, although they may be solid pieces of reporting, do not reach the highest possible level.

The people deserve the best that journalists can produce in a situation such as that in Guyana. It is unfortunate that we have yet to see the kind of reporting it deserves.



Union Crib prices go up again; Bennett requests student ideas

The students are being hit where it hurts again—in the pocketbook.

The Nebraska Union raised the prices of food items in the Crib over the Thanksgiving vacation an average of two to eight cents, depending on what you buy.

The defense, as usual, is inflation, and it seems to be a concrete one. Union Director Al Bennett said prices have been raised according to the wholesalers' increases.

The blame, he says, can be seen in the grocery store.

Of course, we understand that inflation is rampant. As students, it affects us no matter which way we turn. But it seems that union officials could have informed us before break of the imminent price increase, instead of injecting a sour note into the last three weeks of the semester.

A common complaint of most students is their lack of control over university policy.

Bennett has said that it is frustrat-

ing to have to keep raising prices. Multiply that by 23,000 and you have student frustration.

It is difficult to imagine that union officials deliberately did not inform the students of the increase, but Bennett has never informed students.

Now, he has expressed concern that the increases would affect business and he called for ideas from the university community on how to change the situation.

And now is the chance to have minimal control over a small part of university life which affects everyone. So, if the increases incense you, now is the time to tell Bennett, when he has said he will be responsive.

It is hard to tell how much good it will do, but at least he will know how students feel.

On the brighter side: A cup of coffee, the major inflation-grabber in past years, costs the same 24 cents after vacation as it did before.

At least it did Tuesday.

Mental high priests can't help Americans understand tragedy

Washington—With the same simple trust with which his hundreds of followers turned to Jim Jones, we are now turning to our high priests of the mind—the psychiatrists and the psychologists—to explain to us the carnage in Jonestown, Guyana.

It is a ritual we perform after every major, inexplicable tragedy. And now, as always, the priest-experts tell us everything—and nothing.

What we want, of course, is justice, a restoration of order and equilibrium. We want to set the scales right, to get things back into kilter.

Under ordinary circumstances, the balancing mechanisms operate more or less automatically. We sent thieves to jail; we pack murderers off to prison for long stretches or, if their crimes are sufficiently

heinous, we condemn them to death. Balance is restored.

But now and then the scales are wrenched so far out of equilibrium that the normal mechanisms no longer satisfy.

william raspberry

Brutal assaults on small children or old people; assassinations of revered leaders; senseless mass murders. Nothing we can do to individual perpetrators suffices to restore the balance.

It does nothing for our sense of justice to read that a half-dozen suspects have been arrested in the Guyana killings.

The suspects are too unimportant, too weightless to balance the scales, no matter if they are convicted, executed, or even torn limb from limb.

Lee Harvey Oswald and James Earl Ray are too small to counter our sense of loss in the murders of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. We will have our conspiracy no matter what the facts indicate.

Conspiracy theories won't do for the Guyana madness, so we do our other thing. We look for explanations, as if to say that if we understand enough about how these things come to happen, we can prevent their recurrence. With the journalistic equivalent of "Why, oh Lord?" we turn to our experts.

The answers seldom help.

"They (members of Jones' Peoples

Temple) see the world as a hostile one in which they are rejected," says Dr. Ari Kiev, the Cornell University psychiatrist.

"This group gives them a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose in the world. When the group is threatened, as they apparently thought they were, the only thing they have in life appears to be caving in."

"When people are facing dislocations or rapid social changes and the present looks frightening," adds Dr. Robert J. Lifton of Yale, "there is often a cry for a return to absolute simplicity in the rules of living."

Suicide, he said, may be a way of immortalizing these fundamentalist principles when they are under attack by outsiders.

Maybe we would be better off simply accepting the fact that some tragedies cannot be prevented.

I don't mean that there should be no effort to understand the dynamics of cultism, of alienation, or of group suicide. These are all worthy of scientific inquiry.

But I do make a distinction between scientific inquiry aimed at discovering truth and ritual questioning calculated to restore our sense of equilibrium.

The latter strikes me as an attempt to find order, certainty and security in a disorderly, uncertain world. That's what Jim Jones' followers were searching for, and we labeled them "fanatics."

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