The media: the organizations we love to hate

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The Media. The organizations we love to hate. The almost intangible set of people and entities that we just love to point at regardless of our social preferences and orientations. Let us start with the discussion often at the top of debates or accusations involving the media: coverage. The media does not cover enough. The media covers with a bias. The media has been corrupted by politics and special interests. Woe to the mainstream media for the things they will not show you.

There are fairly clear distinctions in the political entities some of our major media centers seem to represent so of course we blame the ones that do not share our opinions for being biased and corrupt. There are also fairly clear distinctions in what different media outlets believe to be of import so we blame the ones that don't share our opinions on what should be prioritized as breaking news.

That brings me to the events that garner the most attention in the modern world and thus in the media: terrorism. The latest major terrorist attack in Belgium brought in a significant spotlight on the events of the day. Every major news network covered the tragic events of the day and every detail from the nature of the attack itself to the acquaintances of the suspects was presented. Expert and opinion pieces on terrorism as a global threat flooded news sites.

However, coverage of attacks in Turkey, Nigeria and in Burkina Faso receive significantly less coverage even though the numbers of lives lost are equivalent and in most cases more. Even the coverage of particular terrorists groups varies depending on who they attack. ISIS and their affiliates have received an increased amount of attention due to their attacks in western nations but that might shield the fact that by sheer number of murders they are only the second most deadly terrorist group in the world after Boko Haram who largely operate in the northeastern part of the world's most populous black nation.

Why would the media have tunnel vision almost exclusively to attacks in Europe or America? There are a number of arguments for why this is the case and I would like to present them. One argument is that those events are much rarer in those continents and countries so they are perceived with much more surprise than they are in countries where terrorist attacks have occurred with more frequency for a longer period of time. The lion taking a nap in Siegel Hall on campus is much more of a surprise than one taking a nap in the zoo.

Another argument is that whereas terrorist groups like Boko Haram and Al-Shabab pose significant threats within localities, the scale of their ambitions has not been expressed through globalization of their activities or successful conquest as in the case of ISIS. ISIS is the school bully who is working through a plan to stuff the principal in a locker.

A lot of the areas where horrifying acts of terrorism occur are in areas without any high quality local news organizations that would serve as first responders to the news about any such events. Unfortunately, this means that there are no clear details about terrorist attacks and as such there is not much information to understand beyond the regular template that many would recognize as "This organization kills this number of people in this place." If the local news stations are not covering information that is closer to them and if the details of events are not clearly portrayed, international media bodies would have a hard or near impossible time finding out about and reporting about such events.

Yet another train of thought says that our media companies are interested singularly in the profit motive and as such have become focused solely on going to the stories that garner the most attention despite the inherent importance or gravity of the situation. As such, the aforementioned two arguments would lead to more interest from readers, viewers and listeners and in turn lead the media spotlight to those events.

My humble opinion comes with an acceptance that all of the aforementioned arguments are true to some degree. I, however, believe that those arguments unfortunately downplay how social media has affected our lives. A decade ago media control and information distribution was handled only by those with the significant capital or capacity to do so but today anyone with a Twitter handle or Facebook page can perform the activities that were limited to so few. Without a doubt major media organizations still hold the ability to sway the fickle winds of attention but as a collective we who share, post, tweet, pin and tag are the new media. Facebook has surpassed a billion active monthly users and if every user shared or forwarded a the same story about falls in oil prices or the cutest cat in the world to another seven people, you will have a story that has been circulated the number of times there are people on the earth. We should remember both our individual and collective powers as distribution centers of information and share the stories, events and details that we really care about. If we can do so, our world would be a more aware, conscious and better place.

Life beyond 35th: escape campus and discover Bronzeville

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At some point during my 2014 freshman orientation, I sat in a classroom in Wishnick Hall along with the rest of my peer mentor group for a brief conversation about Illinois Tech's campus and the community around it. Up at the whiteboard, my peer mentor drew a rough sketch of the modern iteration of Mies's master plan, with boundaries at 31st Street, 35th Street, Michigan Avenue, and the Metra tracks. Slowly and deliberately, she began marking the letter "X" in one spot along each edge, starting with the southern boundary of campus. "Don't go here. Also, don't go here… Really, it's just best to stay on campus."

From the very first week I spent at this university, voices of authority suggested that perhaps Illinois Tech was best left to itself, a bubble of calm in an implied sea of chaos. Throughout my time here, that overtone has been reinforced both implicitly and explicitly, most recently by a full-height stylized map of Chicago outside the admissions office in Perlstein Hall which displays Illinois Tech as the southern terminus of green line, with no noteworthy attractions beyond it. While the university's website acknowledges Bronzeville's history as a center of black culture in Chicago, its section on our own role in the community focuses largely on the negative impact of housing projects like Stateway Gardens on the university's image during the middle of the last century, and speaks little of the current state of this institution's surroundings. If I hadn't heeded a recommendation to check out a café in Washington Park (at Prairie Avenue and Garfield Boulevard, if you're interested), it's possible that I never would have discovered the rich cultural life that lies below 35th street, in Bronzeville and beyond.

The storied, beautiful neighborhood surrounding the Illinois Institute of Technology on three sides is undergoing a massive transformation, one very different than others in the city. Rather than witnessing an influx of largely White renters intent on reinventing the neighborhood in the image of Wicker Park (something that's well underway in Logan Square and Pilsen), Bronzeville's change has come from within, built on a shared history in what was once one of America's most artistically active Black neighborhoods. Black entrepreneurs have led efforts to spur new development with a focus on local business owners, facilitating projects through groups like the Bronzeville Retail Initiative and Bronzeville Neighborhood Collaborative. Some of the community's traditional retail corridors, such as 47th street, are being renewed with efforts like the Bronzeville Artist Lofts (which includes the acclaimed Gallery Guichard, focused on the art of the African diaspora) and the Shops & Lofts at 47th (a $46 million development similar in style to the Stateway Gardens redevelopment along State south of 35th).

With some exceptions, the Illinois Institute of Technology has typically had a hands-off relationship with Bronzeville, especially before the establishment of its Community Affairs office in 1989 (whose tagline proclaims the school to be "not only in the community, but also part of the community"). When Mies Campus was created with help from federal subsidies which also financed the construction of the Prairie Shores apartments, the blocks between the two developments became known as "The Gap", filled with crumbling homes which had unintentionally been disconnected from their place in the neighborhood by well-meaning development efforts. Today, many of the grand homes which fell into disrepair in previous decades are being restored and reverted back into single-family residences as Bronzeville begins to thrive once again and adjust to the rising incomes of its residents.

So where does that leave us? This piece of Chicago that we occupy, once home to legendary jazz performers and civil rights activists, is busy repositioning itself as a center of the Black American metropolis, and at the institutional level, the Illinois Institute of Technology is becoming a positive force in the community as well. Recent IPROs have partnered with community organizations and individuals to foster collaboration, but we have to move to the everyday human level if we truly want to see this school become a part of the community. Instead of heading to Intelligentsia or Dollop for coffee, try a roast at Sip & Savor on 43rd (it's very good). Rather than studying on campus, head just two blocks south to the Chicago Bee Library, housed in an Art Deco landmark building which once contained the offices of one of the city's oldest Black newspapers. Instead of heading to Lincoln Park for your residential architecture fix, simply wander your way down Prairie or Michigan Avenues. Become a patron of the dozens of local businesses which dot the urban landscape, and branch out over time. Bronzeville as a whole isn't the scary place it once was, and it's a shame that our student body's rhetoric hasn't developed along with the community itself.

Photo courtesy of Soren Spicknall