Chapter Four

Good and Bad Stories: The Relationship of News and Education

Personal Background

During the Fall of 1997 I teamed up with a television journalist in order to develop his idea for a documentary film about student transience in urban elementary schools. The concept was to merge academic study with the wide appeal of a broadcast format. As we worked together to write endless grant applications I became very aware that we were coming from two completely different worlds. He favored bullet points, snapshot summaries and sentences with punch; and I, as an aspiring academic reliant upon higher authorities, wrote in drawn out sentences with endless qualifiers and citations. The structure of the story was already developed in his head: Create sympathy for the situation that the schools were in by contrasting visual images of low transience with high. Whereas I wanted to get beyond good/bad binaries and be sensitive to representational issues, he was focused upon how to communicate quickly in a visual format. I worried about perpetuating negative imagery about the schools, the students, their communities. However, his point was simple: The negative image is already there. People are always blaming teachers and public schools for low test scores. This film could communicate to a broad audience that there are other factors involved. It could show the human side to a major societal problem.

The staff of the school we wanted to “document” were overwhelmingly excited about the prospect of a film showing a difficult structural aspect of their job. My superior moral stance about considering the way this representation could reflect upon a neighborhood struggling to define itself in more positive ways, did not sound quite as superior to me anymore. Instead it sounded distant from real human action. In the end, on the grant applications, his style “won.” We took out all my citations and bulleted main ideas. He ended up moving to another project before we were ever awarded any funds, so
we dropped the film idea, but our collaboration had a definite impact upon me. I do not want to critique a representation without thinking more in depth about the storyteller’s point of view.

**Overview**

This chapter is framed as an inquiry about news as a profession and its continuously developing relationship with education; this relationship is the precondition for the construction of many of the “realist tales” which are available for public consumption. First, the production of the Pharon Crosby media story, a story in which urban schooling was on the periphery is examined. Video footage of Crosby’s arrest was the focal point of this story, therefore a discussion about the impact of the true life video on “news as usual” is discussed. Secondly, a more generalized discussion of news and education is constructed from interviews with journalists, educators and community members. In order to understand limitations and possibilities for constructing stories about education it is essential to understand the impact of shifting societal boundaries which are leading to increased consumerism.

**Constructing the Crosby Story: An Entry into Understanding News**

On April 25 of 1995, 18 year old Pharon Crosby, an African American Cincinnati Public School student, was violently arrested at the intersections of Sixth and Vine Streets in downtown Cincinnati (SEE CHAPTER THREE). The confrontation was initiated when Crosby did not obey the officer’s request to move away from a building entrance.

Somewhere after this initial point of bodily noncompliance, the arrest became a spectacle beyond its immediate audience, transformed into “news”. Purely by chance, on that particular day, veteran television news reporter Jim Fields (pseudonym) and videographer, Charles Laud (pseudonym), turned their news van on to Sixth Street. It was not their intention to find news there; they were on their way back to the station from a
story but, “because there was either construction or a slow moving truck” (Fields, E-mail 1-22-99) their regular route had been abandoned. Instead, they turned on Sixth Street, and this turn made all the difference. Though news crews often listen to police scanners for potential stories, according to Fields, being on Sixth Street at that moment of the day was only a “bizarre coincidence” (Fieldnote 10-9-98).

As Fields and Laud pulled onto Sixth Street on April 25, they saw a police car and a crowd of people. Laud, the videographer, hopped out of the car and “just began rolling film. We didn’t even know for sure what was happening” (Fields, Fieldnote 10-9-98) Channel 5’s News team proceeded to capture the subsequent physical struggle and violent arrest of 18 year old, Pharon Crosby onto film. “I had no idea, no idea, at the time that it would become such a big story,” Fields said (Fieldnote 10-9-98). A “big story” is one that captures the public’s imagination, that raises interest to a fervor pitch; a big story is one that draws viewers to the television because they want to see, have to see, have to know. Like Fiske’s (1993) analysis of the news story of Rodney King, a “big story” becomes its own media event.

A media event is hypervisual, for besides its condensation of social antagonisms, it is technologically distributed and thus inserted in to our unpredictably different social contexts. Its mediation gives it a different social reality from an event that is confined to the immediate conditions of its occurrence.” (Fiske, 1993, p. 128)

The videotape of the arrest of Crosby became a “media event” for Cincinnati in 1995. Documented to live beyond its own time, the arrest symbolized many things to many different people. Feeling its explosive power, Channel 5 confined the video footage to their own “exclusive” coverage, turning down requests from a 24 hour national news network, as well as many national, international and local programs.

The station manager didn’t want to give it to anyone. Those 15-20 seconds out of context, we were afraid, out of context, there would be a riot. (Fields, Fieldnote 9-14-98)

Despite a policy to keep the “lid on” the story, it did gain some national coverage. For example NBC Nightly News aired the story (Weintraub, 1995, April 28, B1) and Inside Edition interviewed Crosby (Skertic, 1995, April 13, A13).
In regards to news, the national and the local are never completely separate. Popular narratives are linked and regurgitated into new forms. Meaning is constructed through an endless linkage of these forms. Regardless of its purposefully contained localness, the arrest video of Crosby shares much in common with the nationally viewed, homemade video of Rodney King of 1992. Both are inscribed through race, violence, masculinity, police-community relations, and the sheer energy of bearing witness, of being there as it happens. They visually tap into a historical narrative of “official” authority being marshaled brutally against African Americans. Rodney King, a black man, is shown being kicked and hit by the Los Angeles police. Pharon Crosby, a black teenager, is shown struggling with a single police officer and then as other police officers arrive on the scene he is hit, kicked and maced. Although the response of Cincinnati’s police chief Snowden, a distinguished looking white man, was, “It’s not a Rodney King situation and I don’t think those comparisons are fair” (Morford, 1995, April 26) his assertion only lends credence to the fact that the beating of Rodney King could never be separated from a public understanding of what became branded by the news as the “Sixth Street Melee” or “Scuffle on Sixth and Vine.” During Crosby’s trial, in an effort to uncover bias, the prosecution was allowed to cross examine a witness by inquiring about her attitude toward the Rodney King case (Delguzzi, 1995, October 25, B6). In the United States, Rodney King is a consensus image, without a consensus understanding. By this I mean that the public consents (not always with conscious will) to internalize an image of “the beating of Rodney King” even at the same time individuals strain with all their faculties to draw their own understanding of what this image might or might not mean. The “arrest” of Crosby became a consensus image, without a consensus understanding for the city of Cincinnati. People vehemently disagreed about what they saw happen, yet inevitably the event became woven into their diverse social contexts.

In her reading of the Rodney King video Ronell (1995) suggests that television produces narratives that compulsively turn around crimes, that in effect, “name an
unreadable relation to the incomprehensibility of survival in relation to the law” (109). Videos, such as the beating of Rodney King (and in this case, the beating of Crosby) “act as an ethical scream” forcing on TV an interrogation “about its own textual performance in the production of force” (116). This reflects several of what Dahlgren (1995) suggests are post modern characteristics in televisual discourses that undermine the mimetic: “…self disclosure, self reflexivity…and acknowledgement of and commentary about the media's status as constructed artifice” (36). A certain amount of self-consciousness appeared in the broadcast television news. After issuing its initial claim to “capture the entire incident on tape” all the succeeding stories worked to rescind this notion. Repeatedly Fields, the television reporter warned, “This is not the whole story. It would be a big mistake to draw conclusions based just what was seen on the videotape” (Morford, 1995, April 25). Jim Fields emphatically reminded the audience that “things happened before videographer ‘Charles Laud’ and I got on the scene and things also happened out of camera range while Charles was shooting” (Morford, 1995, April 25). Fields emphasized to the viewers that there were “8 seconds behind the cruiser” when the camera could not see Crosby and Hall. (Morford, 1995, April 26). The video footage places the news in the position of reporting on the incompleteness of its narrative conventions, at the same time, subtly suggesting that if the camera only had more access, more reality would be uncovered.

Another way in which the media text worked to question itself, is by showing the unedited version of the film footage (Morford, 1995, April 26). In this film footage, the camera can be seen turning to and fro, slightly staggering, as it combs the street for the site of action, the site of the story. This draws attention to the constructed nature of the visual and how the spectator’s attention is focalized. Also, the plot is changed. Rather than showing the second young man being chased by police at the end of the story, the viewer learns it happened simultaneously at the beginning of Crosby’s arrest. In fact Officer Traine, who chased the young man instead of remaining and helping Officer Hall, was recommended for counseling and possible additional training in the City Manager’s Report.
for his lack of judgment (Incident need not have occurred, 1995, June 7. A5). How much
does this transposition alter the meaning of the text? If the audience perceived that there
were two officers there, before the physical struggle with Crosby escalated, would this
have put more emphasis on the responsibility and actions of the police?

Finally, this broadcast story focused self-consciously on the issue of race. Race as
a signifier, was used to deconstruct race as a signifier in the story. Racial injustice could
not be separated from what was perceived to be happening on the screen, and yet
essentialized notions of race seemed to be deconstructed through the very medium whose
portrayal seemed to reify racial difference. The broadcast news devoted a segment to
deconstructing obvious racial codings of the police officers (Morford, 1995, April 27).

We bent over backwards to show that not all the cops were white, and one of the
cops who maced him was black and one of the policeman was partially… Asian…
and one was a woman. I mean it was the melting pot police department we now …
partially have…It was not what it looked like, but people see what they want to see.
(Fields, Interview, 12-30-98)

That Crosby was black was never disputed, but that the police represented monolithic
whiteness was. This wasn’t a black teenager being beaten by four white cops. Officer
Hall was Japanese American and American Indian (Morford, 1995 April 27). One Officer
was African American three were Anglo Americans, (one being female). Officer Hall’s
sister sentimentally spoke of Hall’s mixed heritage, emphasizing his identity as an
American of color who had himself been subjected to racist terms such as “Jap” and
“Chink” (Morford, 1995 April 27). Officer Fields, the officer who the OCCI reports
suggested, “did not act reasonably when he Maced [sic] Mr. Crosby while Mr. Crosby was
held on the cruiser” (Curnette, et al.,1995, May 25, A6) was African American. This was
a black teenager being beaten/disciplined, to some extent, by a multicultural police force.
However, Crosby’s status as essentialized “black subject” was never openly interrogated
from mainstream media, only the identities of the police officers were destabilized. In the
words of Angela Davis (1999)

[T]he most insidious effect of reality-based shows is that the myth of rampant crime
is reinforced, and the repetitions of “criminals” that flash across the television
screen become symbolic objects in the viewers’ minds and then translate into fearful and racist responses to certain types of people of color, who are criminalized by these representations. (p. 200)

The tactic of destabilizing the race of the officers and leaving Crosby's representation stand, did not open up the cyclic connection between criminality and race that Davis critiques.

Essentialism is always a project of power, but its ends are not always hegemonic. Spivak (1993) discusses the “risk of essentialism” as moments when cultural groups essentialize aspects of identity in order to form strategic coalitions. Although “[s]pectatorial positions are multi-form, fissured, even schizophrenic” (Shohat and Stam, 1994, 350) it was Crosby’s essentialized “blackness” which helped mobilize many members of the African American community to protest the force used against him. However, as Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us, there is no essential black subject.” “Race cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity” (Hall, 443).

During the interview for Inside Edition the week after the arrest, Crosby said, “I just don’t think that race is really important. I think that it is much more important that police used excessive force regardless of my race” (Hopkins, 1995, May 2, A4). Later, Crosby, through his lawyers, publicly stated that he “thought police actions were motivated by race.” In contrast to the Rodney King beating, in some ways race is less simple, less direct to discuss. Yet, “race” as a concept appears inescapably necessary to make meaning of this video footage. Crosby’s blackness is merged with the concept of inner city schooling. Adolescence, social geography, his black knit cap, the taxi, the metro bus, the band of yelling students, the anchor’s opening comments of “trouble, wild, scary” (Morford, 1995, April 25) swirl together, and Crosby becomes representative of urban high school students. Crosby’s identity cannot be completely separated from his identity as student in one of “those schools”. Urban schools, urban teenagers, they are the problem contained in the phrase “inner city school” and a negative reading is already provided in plentiful supply.
The happenstance videotaping of the arrest interrupted news as usual. Violence on the streets is not uncommon; in the words of a local protester, the story was “unique, only because it was captured on tape” (Skertic, 1995, April 30, A1). When I asked informants whether or not that they thought the existence of the videotape was positive or negative responses varied along a fairly narrow continuum. As one former CPS student explained:

…it keeps things in perspective for me. That’s how I feel. You know that everybody knows what’s going on. You know you could judge for yourself if it was wrong, if it was right. I think that was a good thing. Made the police look bad, but you know, that’s life. (Kenner interview, 11-23-98)

Another student, a friend of Crosby’s suggested,

Yeah I think it [videotaping the arrest] was good just to let people know how come because, believe it or not a lot of people become educated off the media. They won’t believe a story until it is on the news. And whatever slant is put on that story is how they will believe. And I’d rather it was caught on videotape for people…to see what happened. And I’m glad they were able to see what happened, because if it wasn’t put on videotape it might have been a little bit worse than what it was. Or you know, if it wasn’t put on videotape it’d been Pharon Crosby arrested because of this and they could’ve added anything else, and if we didn’t see it and we weren’t there then it would be everybody else’s word against the few students words who were there during the time that it happened. (Steele, Interview, 10-23-98)

However, all the people I spoke with, regardless of their personal feelings about whether the police or Crosby were more “right”, were against the over-playing of the video. As a school administrator phrased it,

My personal view of this incident is that it was a travesty. It seemed to be a ploy to boost ratings for channel 5 and their news dep’t. You could not turn on that station for any length of time without them showing that footage between one commercial or show. (Drey email, 10-12-98)

Interestingly, the skepticism about the over-insertion of the violent videotape across the airwaves did not translate into a compulsion not to watch. The desire to see was still compelling despite a cynical knowledge that it was a ratings booster.

As a media event, the Crosby video arrest story operated in a contradictory fashion. It helped create the spectacle of broadcast news while also causing the news to discuss its own limitations in story telling. It reified a connection between African American males and criminality at the same moment it opened up a space to contest these power relations by
prompting the coalition of nine civil rights groups (Curnette, 1995, June 7) and providing a platform to address issues of race, youth, and police publicly. And finally, the video was “the testimonial that cannot speak with referential assurance but does assert the truth of what it says” (Ronell, 1995, 116). Few dispute its reality, only its interpretation.

**The Relationship Between Journalism and Urban Education**

As argued in Chapter Three, the Croby story constructs a chain of meaning around urban students and urban schooling in an indirect manner. It is not what is thought of as a traditional school story. Although meanings are advanced this way, it is also important to examine perceptions about how stories that relate directly to issues of urban schooling are constructed. The image of urban education is negotiated at both a national and local level. Much is at stake in the construction and negotiation of this imagery:

> Education is one of the areas in which everyone has at least some knowledge because all of us have gone to school. Public images of what schools are or should be are powerful influences on schools, and usually in a conservative direction. People’s mental models of schooling, even for teachers, are largely shaped by one’s own experience as a student. People may have strongly established ideas about what counts as a school, a classroom, a subject of study, an appropriate atmosphere, a disciplinary code. The power of these in maintaining the status quo can be very real. (Levin & Riffel, 1997, p. 55)

Films such as *Dangerous Minds* and media events such as the Columbine School shootings are powerful influences upon public understandings of what education is. However, the local news, (which is never completely separate from these broader narratives) is the terrain upon which most people have access to think and about and exert influence on their own educational site. Therefore it is crucial to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities undergirding this relationship.

News is a socially constructed reality (Tuchman, 1978) and usually it is constructed from official sources and operates as an “ally of legitimated institutions” (Tuchman, 1978, 4). The “city hall, court house, police and fire dispatches” (Tuchman, 1978, 20) are all mainstay sources of American television news. In regards to education, a newspaper reporter phrased it this way
How you cover your beat is kind of dependent on meetings, [school]board packets, what the school district hands out, and word of mouth. (Young, Interview 12-8-98)

Traditional school stories include coverage of “test scores, budget battles, school board politics and superintendent searches” (Wadsworth, 1998, 20). News is constructed by professionals who work within specific institutional contexts in order to put stories together. Often the labor conditions of news production are overlooked and it is taken for granted that the news is an objective, continuous “record of everything that is fit to be published” (Curran, J. 1996, 120). “It’s funny,” Jim Fields says after being recognized at a restaurant,

people are always surprised to see me out on the street. There is a perception that I work all the time. I basically have a nine to six job. I log in my story and go home after work, just like everybody else. (Fieldnote 12-30-98)

“Important events” do not unfold in an uninterrupted flow, but are sedimented in specific conditions of a job. According to Tuchman (1978)

few reporters are available to cover stories before 10 A.M. or after 7 p.m. on weekdays, and even fewer of those times on the weekend(42)...TV news was potentially limited to occurrences happening between ten and four p.m. (p. 43)

For example arrests and community police interactions occur on a daily basis in urban centers, the video footage of Crosby’s arrest was not an average news story, because of its spontaneity. Finally, most news organizations are located within downtown areas. Therefore, despite a coverage area that may extend to several counties, the further away a story is from downtown, “the less likely it is to get coverage” (Fields, Interview 12-30-98). The routinized search for news combined with geographic location constructed a perception referred to by Kaniss (1991) as “city myopia.”

[A] distorted view of the local environment in which the central city continues to occupy the most important political economic and social position in the region. (p. 75)

The city is the center glue of most news coverage.
In contrast to most large, mainstream newspapers, which might have education reporters for the metropolitan area as well as the surrounding suburbs most broadcast news shows do not assign a specific "education beat".

T.V. may have an education beat loosely defined, but most places are general assignment. They may have a consumer reporter, an investigative reporter, a political reporter, but very few stations...have someone who is education beat alone. Most stations just don't have that many reporters that they can allocate one reporter to do one subject like that...(Fields, Interview 12-30-98)

There are certain "mandatory" stories which are covered such as first week of school and test scores, but for the most part education is an "elective," and elective stories are generated by the personal interest of the individual journalist (Fields Interview 10-9-98).

The core courses are...the three alarm fire, the big murder and maybe a major political decision. And then the electives are what you do that maybe differentiates your from other stations. (Fields, Interview 12-30-98)

Some of the smaller newspapers cover education as a general assignment but large mainstream newspapers tend to have an education beat. Still allocation of a specific “beat” is not insurance that coverage will be thorough or in depth. According to criticisms by Kaplan, “Often inexperienced young reporters are put on the school beat” and they tend to cover education via school board meetings (Watson, 1998, 20).

Public education is covered, in contrast to parochial or private schools because it is considered a matter of public concern since it is supported by taxes, which everyone pays (Fields, Interview 12-30-98; Watson 1998). Public schools are considered to be essential ground for gathering stories that capture public interest. “9 out of 10 Americans habitually place [public education] at or near the top of their worry lists” (Kaplan, 1998, 195). Education hovers at the top of the “public agenda in most polls, right behind crime and the economy” (Watson, 1998, 16). Fervent public anxieties pressure news sources for more and more “realist” tales about urban education. However, as Ralph Waldo Emerson aptly noted

…the very word education has a cold and hopeless sound to most Americans. ‘A treatise on education, a convention on education, a lecture, a system,’ he wrote, ‘affects us with a slight paralysis and a certain yawning of the jaws.’ (Aaron, 1939, p.34 paraphrased in Kaplan, 1998, p. 196).
Public education occupies a space between anxiety and boredom in the public mind; this is the difficult space which media must negotiate in order to construct stories that sell. The emphasis to cover public education is frequently perceived by educators as a gloss of negativity painted over the work that they do on a daily basis.

This perception of negativity is articulated strongly by Berliner & Biddle (1998). They state

Public schooling is really about ordinary people trying to make reasonable decisions in the best interests of their communities – decisions that will help their young people grow to be knowledgeable, economically productive and decent citizens. [These intentions are] commonly ignored in the derision and the bloodletting in which the media indulge (29).

As part of their searing attack on news media portrayals of education, Berliner and Biddle (1998) summarized the following list of shortcomings. In their opinion the press:

• Is biased and covers the negative side of news stories much more diligently than the positive side
• Present too simplistic and incomplete a view of the educational problems and issues that they are reporting
• Is more critical of the schools in its editorial policies than it is complimentary
• Has editorial policies that are biased against public schools, against school change, and in particular, against he schools that serve the poor
• Displays a lack of understanding of the complexity of school life in contemporary America
• Show an appalling lack of understanding of statistics and social science research, without which reporters cannot properly interpret the huge amount of data that the educational system produces
• Shows an ignorance of the role of poverty as a root cause of many of the difficulties in our schools (pp. 29–30)

Several educators shared a similar perception of negativity as discussed above. The comments below are representative of what I heard. A teacher states,

We have, I think in Cincinnati we have a real anti-education and anti-teacher bent, … The whole while time that I've been in Cincinnati, they have not ever really talked about Cincinnati Public, with any amount of normalcy. It's not normal to have a newspaper talk about teachers doing well, strives made. When we do well, it doesn't make the paper. When our test scores fall then all of a sudden that's on the paper. But when we bring the writing test scores up 5 points in 1 year from 1 school, that never gets in the paper…Most teachers that I know and have dealt with in 26 years believe strongly that if any of these people writing these stories tried to do this and tried to come in here without help, without assistance, over just a
couple of day basis, that they would have a whole new perspective. Most teachers feel very misunderstood by the media and also very maligned (Interview, Randall, 11-24-95).

Urban administrators shared concerns about the difficulty of getting positive stories placed in the media. A principal states:

Well, like I said, I had a pretty good relationship with them and they, certain reporters did better than others, but they don't tell the good stories. They had one TV camera there for an incident that happened at the school and I said oh, you should come up for something good some time. He said “oh, I will.” Well I said, you know we have the honors society induction in about 2 minutes and you know you could film that. He said, “Oh, I couldn't do that, my editor would never want something like that. That's not news.” I said well sure it is. He said, “No.” So I said you're telling me that news is this exciting, negative, out of line, he said “Yeah, I guess I am telling you that.” (Maxwell, 12-17-98)

Another administrator also echoed this difficulty.

Usually when the press has been in the building of their own initiative or their own accord, it is to cover something they consider to be negative and newsworthy. They rarely come out to cover anything, except for sports, rarely come out to cover anything positive, unless it is motivated by someone from within the building. (Lewis, Interview 11-30-98)

In contrast to this perception of negative coverage, Robert Frahm, a former president of the Educational Writers Association stated, “I believe that if you were to count our stories and rate them as positive or negative, there would be more positives” (Watson, 1998, 19)ii. A liaison between business partnerships and schools in Cincinnati who keeps track of school coverage related a similar belief to Frahm’s.

I’d say people’s perceptions within the school district is that the media only covers the problems. I think when you look at it and sort of do a count on it… there’s a fair amount of coverage on kind of … feel good stories about what’s happening, what’s new… [For example] there is a fair understanding in the community that the buildings are in tough shape and they need to be fixed up. And that really comes from the media coverage over the years. (Gaines, Interview 11-23-98)

This comment points to the ways in which a good school story can be one that illustrates problems which are fixable. In the context of school buildings, there is a negative attribution that is separate from the educators and the students who are in the schools. Buildings are not people. As in the example of the documentary about transience, if the problem is perceived as societal, outside of the school, it is not considered a bad school
story. However this negative perception can be layered onto the students in schools easily as well.

On one of the levy campaigns we did back in 1993, getting out and talking to people, they had this perception that schools were graffiti-ridden jungles. When you got them in the school, even the schools in the worst neighborhoods, you won’t find that chaos out of control graffiti-ridden kind of thing … There are some outstanding pockets in our school system, in our school district. Even if that’s 3/4 of the coverage of he media, it’s not what people remember. (Gaines, Interview 11-23-98)

“Graffiti-ridden” implies a moral lack within the school and those that attend more than the image of a structural flaw of broken down buildings. The school stories that illustrate schools as a place of problems which can be acted upon by the larger community (and not the school personnel themselves) are often viewed as “good” school stories by educators. Hence a story that promotes the need for more money for buildings is a good school story – though not necessarily a positive one. Whereas a story that is negative and implies the problem is within the school’s ability to fix itself, is considered a negative representation – a bad or “anti-education” story. Although promotional stories, or what one newspaper reporter termed, “bake sale” stories were a very evident part of her news coverage, these stories were not seen as creating a lasting impression about schools as places.

The desire of educators to secure more good stories about schools takes place in a very high stakes context. The perceptions that voters have of public schools matters.

Because of the way that schools are funded in the state of Ohio, the districts have to go back to the voters every 3 – 4 years on average, just for inflationary increases…School districts have a rollback feature so that funding is rolled back. You have to keep coming back to the voters. The voters don’t understand this, they think that you’re coming at them for new money to do more stuff…(Gaines, Interview, 11-23-98)

In financially distressed urban districts the ability to tell “good” stories within the already negativized public space of the urban school is particularly difficult.

The current emphasis on educational accountability through standardized tests illustrates this tension well.

Proficiency testing, I think, and the media coverage of it is driving, really driving, the schools. They’re responding to that. (Gaines, Interview 11-23-98)
Large urban districts do not, typically, score high on standardized tests. Yet, the scores of tests such as The Ohio Proficiency Test are considered public information. The mere reporting of these scores is a negative representation of the urban schools. As one teacher criticizes,

> There are a lot of factors that go into why student don’t pass the proficiency test but they [news media] don’t ever mention that kind of stuff. They don’t ever come out here and talk to our students… no reporter comes out here and talks to the kids, gets to know the kids, and gets to understand why a kid might not pass a proficiency test. Well, you know, when you talk to a kid and that student doesn’t know where he or she is going to spend the night, what the hell do they care whether they’re going to pass the proficiency test that means they can graduate 3 – 4 years down the road, when they might not even think they’re going to be alive 3 – 4 years down the road. I’m not saying that’s the sole reason, but there’s a lot that goes into it. (O’Rourke, Interview, 11-24-98)

He suggests that stories should represent test scores as socioeconomic issues, outside of the school’s control. A reporter, for an African American newspaper tells of the difficulty of trying to get to the bottom of low test scores.

> Well, for example, in __________, we did an article on the fact that all these higher 4th grades in ________ failed the proficiency tests. Now I could understand maybe one or two kids, or maybe 3-4 kids fail it, but the entire class, the entire grade fail it? That [story], it just says what did the teachers do, what was the dedication of the principal, were the kids learning? are the kids able to learn? What are the problems? What information are they lacking? Why couldn’t they assess what was in the test, and apply it to the paper. I mean…there are a lot of things going on there that just says the school is not working. And we had parents protesting it. We had a number of parents who were involved and said look, my kid passed it or could’ve passed it by one point or two. But there are other kids who didn’t pass it. (Summers, 12-9-98).

The story was protested by parents, despite its obvious concern with educational issues of importance, because it operated as a “bad” story (from a local community member’s point of view) by questioning the school, the teachers, and the abilities of the students. In this negative representation of an urban setting, the quality of education did not appear so much at stake as the identity of the actors. However, by journalistic standards it could be considered a good story.

> Both public schools and journalism have, at their hearts, conceptions of a relationship between the individual and society, and conceptions of public citizenry. The
primary rationale for the press in the U.S., according to Seibert et al. (1963) is to "assume an obligation for social responsibility" (7). The "chief purpose" of the media is "to inform, entertain, sell, but chiefly to raise conflict to the plane of discussion" (7). According to a broadcast journalist,

[I]deally you want to educate people or bring an interest to something that they didn’t know enough about. [Y]ou want to bring issues to the floor…(Fields, Interview 12-30-98).

And as a newspaper reporter succinctly stated, “I would love…to effect change” (Young, 12-8-98). Journalism, “the fourth estate” is charged with a social responsibility to provide access to information. Therefore, any story, even a negative one, that does this fairly, and brings issues up for discussion is fulfilling its societal mission. With this understanding, it is interesting to learn what makes a good story from a journalists point of view.

Broadcast news utilizes one major yardstick to decide whether a story is worth covering. In the words of a broadcast news editor

Our philosophy is NEWS IS WHAT PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT [emphasis his]. (Manta, email 8-23-99)

When I shadowed a broadcast journalist and sat in on the "morning meeting" in which story ideas were put forth, the question "What are people talking about?" was frequently interjected (Fieldnote 10-9-98). Broadcast news consistently tries to gauge possible public interest. This can create a circular effect between venues of storytelling. According to an editor,

Like most people, we get "what people are talking about" from listening to radio, reading papers, magazines and hearing what co-workers and others are talking about. There are a number of "hot buttons"--if the conversations refer to children, celebrities, entertainment and/or animals, it usually is top of mind. And then, of course, there is the weather... on most people's mind. And we always look for conflict, which makes a good story. So if it meets any of those criteria, we take it to a talking stage and see if the story can be turned around within a day. Then it's up to reporters to find the players and make it even more interesting. (Manta, Email, 9-3-99)

When asked whether broadcast news creates the public interest or primarily reacts to it, a television editor (Manta, Email 9-3-99) responded

Both -- We create more interest in some issues that get buried or little play
because of other news of the day. We also react. Sometimes we'll expand on a story the newspaper might have broken that morning, or a radio station. Or a competitor. Besides, how does one measure public interest. We do what we think has people's interest or will get their interest. After all, we are the public too.

According to a newspaper reporter, only "[o]ccasionally do the TV news beat us on something, which they usually don't; they usually follow our lead" (Young, Interview 12-08-98). Despite various strategies of communication, the venues of television and newspaper news are not completely autonomous. Both reply upon and mutually construct public reaction, public talk.

“Television is the most important source of news in our society. It has now far outstripped the press as the main source of information” (Eldridge, 1993, 1). It has been suggested that " [t]he 'average' American will spend in excess of seven years watching television' (Storey, 1998, 9). Less and less people are relying on newspapers to stay informed about the world. But, television can not provide the same level of detail that a newspaper story can (Young, Interview 12-8-98). The parameters of storytelling in local broadcast news create the context for this lack of detail. Stories must often be “turned around” in one day. According to a broadcast news editor, “we do a lot of watercooler stories and stories that don't require a lot of depth to cover” (Manta, email 8-23-99) A television news reporter describes this structural barrier,

You can hardly say anything in a minute and a half. You got 2 or 3 soundbites and a little bit of track which is you [the reporter] talking. And that’s it. Your average T.V. story is a minute-and-a-half, two minutes long. (Fields, Interview 12-30-98)

Length of time combined with the necessity of communicating visually are great determinants in creating what most people I spoke to suggested was a “shallowness” in broadcast news. As a community worker in an impoverished neighborhood put it,

I have yet to see a T.V. news story that really understands the experiences of the people they are showing. (Masters, Interview 11-23-98).

Television reporters are obviously aware of these difficulties. As Fields puts it, “Most stories come and go. Most stories are instantaneously forgotten by the public” (Interview, 12-30-98). However, despite lack of depth, filmic representations have a unique ability to
burnish visual images into the memory synapses (Jameson, 1992). The specifics of a story might be erased, but the image lasts. The need for effective video and sound bites – as well as the need to appeal to a mass audience – also leads local television news to search for approaches to the news that stress emotion and drama (Kaniss, 1991). The way a television story can be told relates directly to the time available.

In a particular story that’s about a minute-and-a-half long, you can do no more than two or three things. You have to really hit the major points. You have to be real simple. And…you have to be visual, and that effects how you do stories. I mean school stories can be visual but they all kind of look the same after awhile. [I]f you want to do a T.V. story on schools there’s two ways you can do it.[One] the schools’ll have a news conference, you go grab the information, you do it, you move on, or [two] maybe you’ll want to focus. This is little Susie. Try to humanize it. This is little Susie, little Susie goes to school at…little Susie got this on her test …Because you gotta try to get people to watch. You can’t just show up raw data and expect people to watch, except those who really, really care, and that’s not many people. So you got to make a little show biz it in. Not cheapen it, or make it patronizing, but you have to make it entertaining. It’s not like the paper where if people don’t care about this article, they just flip and move on. With the T.V. you gotta try and keep ‘em watching the whole time so you have to be cognizant of making it interesting and making every story kind of human. (Fields, Interview 12-30-98)

According to a broadcast editor,

Pathos. People make a good story. If the video, the interview or he circumstances move you…make you more interested…make you happy or sad…make you want to hear more, then I feel we did our job…In general, we must think of how we make a story interesting to everyone…no matter where they live. (Manta, email 8-23-99).

A good story revolves around conflict and people. Emotion. Berliner and Biddle (1998) refer to this as the “if it bleeds, it leads” mentality that they suggest prevails in journalism.

A “good” story from both a news and educators perspective is one where the locus of pathos intersects, where public sentiments are directed to caring, admiring, and acknowledging the intentions and the efforts of school personnel.

**Telling Stories About Schools within Shifting Boundaries**

News coverage has developed within an ever-shifting landscape of notions of public space. In his study of how news constructs reality, Tuchman (1978) utilized the
concept of frame. He listed several ways in which news apparently operated on reality, in its function as a “window on the world.”

[T]he news aims to tell us what we want to know, need to know, and should know (1)...News imparts to occurrences their public character, as it transforms mere happenings into publicly discussable events (3)...[N]ews coordinates activities within a complex society by making otherwise inaccessible information available to all (paraphrase Lasswell, 1948, 4).

Television news acts as a frame legitimizing a story as important for public consumption. In the case of Crosby’s arrest, members of the metropolitan area were provided with the same image of violence, thus in some sense, giving the city a feeling of being a connected landscape. “Mass communication helps people to visualize society, feel connected to it, and make sense of its processes through a shared set of understandings” (Curran, 1996, p. 127; paraphrase Alexander, 1981; Carey 1992). “The exaggerated focus on the importance of the city [myopia] may actually work to attract a suburban audience since it creates a unifying symbol of local identity” (Kaniss, 1991, 75). However, it is important to note, in the same moment the image constructs a communal landscape, it also fractures the idea of a total community understanding. If crisis, or conflict is the focus of most news stories, than the ideal community will always be turning upon this fractured this lens.

Although journalism often reconstructs official narratives from multiple identities, the official narrative is always buffeted by multiple competing narratives, which are staggered by social geography, income, race, age and gender. Community is simultaneously constructed as completed whole and set of conflicting differences at the same time.

Through news coverage of the arrest, and through the professional media practice of “showing both sides” the notion of wholly consensual meaning is collapsed through divergent axes of black and white, police and civilians, youth and adult. In the Crosby case the media both fed off these divisions and attempted to “heal” them, by calling their very nature to the attention of viewers.

There are other connections between the two sites. The news has a unique public/private character not unlike the nature of public education. Both school and
television operate on the individuals within their own private space (home, body), as
windows and doorways to larger public space. As stated by Dahlgren (1995)

> Television is a part of our daily lived reality, penetrating into the microcosms of our
society world. It also serves to organize and structure that world, both in terms of
daily schedule and interaction within the household...and in offering frameworks of
collective perception: television links the everyday world to the larger symbolic
orders of social and political life. (p. 39)

Schooling also operates on the world in a similar way.

> Adults recognize schools to be an important dual gateway….it represents the child’s
physical passage from the protected private space of the home to the unpredictable
public space outside. (Trend, 1995, p. 84)

In a pluralistic liberal democratic society there is an understanding that schooling must
transmit values, alongside a realization that there is deep disagreement by many groups in
society about what constitutes value and meaning (McLaughlin & Juceviciene, 1997).

> On matters of serious disagreement, however, where scope for a legitimate
diversity of view is acknowledged, education seeks to achieve a principled
forebearance of influence: it seeks not to shape either the beliefs or the personal
qualities of students in the light of any substantial or ‘comprehensive’ conception of
the good which is significantly controversial. Instead, public education is either
silent about such matters or encourages students to come to their own reflective
decisions about them. One way of expressing an overall way the nature of
educational influence on this view is that it exerts a complex combination of
centripetal (unifying) and centrifugal (diversifying) on students and on society
itself. (McLaughlin & Juceviciene, 1997, p. 25)

This complex process of unifying and diversifying at the same time is a central source of
antagonism in many of the current debates about education as a public entity.

> In this context, where youth is at the border of a public/private space, control of
storytelling is a major source of conflict for journalists and educators. A broadcast news
editor describes it thusly,

> From the educators point of view, they fear how we will “tell the story.” Educators
have total control over the physical plant, the style of teaching, the discipline of
students, etc. So it is problematic for them to control the message. We come into
the classroom to tell a story and they have no guarantee of how we will tell it. So,
we do the story, and they don’t like a paragraph, a sentence, and they will shut us
down in the future. In______, the PR guy for the school district will rarely return
calls until the afternoon on a story we do, good or bad, about the district, a school
or a classroom. It works for them – we can’t get there until kids are gone and
without kids, the story is usually uninteresting. And when we try to work around
him, we pay for it later. Because of that “control” thing, our goals rarely match. (Manta, Email, 8-7-99).

Schools were viewed as gatekeepers often blocking access to important public stories. All journalists reported the necessity of maintaining a good rapport with the “PR person” for fear of being cut off from the flow of information.

In most cases, information must flow through the public information officer, which gums things up. And, because he/she must never appear to play favorites, there’s too much ying and yang in handing out good stories… (Manta, Email 8-17-99)

However, despite help from central office administrators, it is often the principal who is on the front line for news media stories. As a broadcast editor states, “They must come to terms with the fact that we will show up in an emergency (real or imagined)” (Manta, Email 8-17-99). Two principals discussed their roles as “gatekeepers” and the inherent tensions of dealing with news media about sensitive issues.

I’m my own public affairs office and I just know that there are certain things that I just don’t say to the media because they will take whatever you say and use it in whatever way they choose. So I, generally speaking, unless I put it in writing, and it is a press release for something positive that is happening, I won’t comment to the media. I will refer them however to the superintendent. (Lewis, Interview 11-30-98).

Second principal,

When you have incidences become public at the school you’re going to have to deal with them somehow. Not only because public affairs might want you to straighten out the stuff, but they're going to tell the story anyway, that's what public affairs tells you sometimes. I mean they're going to tell the story anyway if you have something to tell them that will make the story a little more positive to stand on, you ought to talk to them. But, I have a pretty good relationship with the press generally. I think honesty helps. You know when someone calls up and says you know you were first on the list of so and so, what do you attribute that to. I mean, it could be a good first or a bad first. Sometimes you choose to talk to them, sometimes you don’t. Radio stations love to hate you while you're talking to them on the phone. TV stations love to just show up, and of course then the 2 major newspapers and the ______ all 3 of those, call usually and I think they tape too, but they try to quote you. I felt that most of the people most of the time from the media, at least with me, were respectful when you said hey, I don't really want to discuss that and then their response would be like I said, “well we're going to tell the story anyway, we'd kind of like your perspective.”…[W]ell I imagine you would like my perspective, but you're not going to get it. (Maxwell, 12-17-98).

According to a principal, administrative duties in reacting to a crisis takes on a new dimension when there is news media involved.
Oh yeah, that's the hard part of dealing with this. You know if you have an incident, and it's one you're dealing with at that moment, and then all the media shows up and you have to deal with media, instead of dealing with the situation. That's the first problem. The second thing is then the parents and the community and the neighbors might start calling you too, saying oh, what are you doing up there and all kinds of other things. And that of course takes all the time when I don't want to use an example, but you know when you're over here dealing you know you need to be over there dealing with this instead you're sitting in your office talking to all the media and the parent's and the neighbors and that's a problem. (Maxwell, 12-17-98).

Many of the members of the media did not understand this hostility directed at them for just doing their job. They saw it as part of the public flow of information. According to a newspaper reporter,

[T]he district hates any bad publicity, they hate for any controversial news to get out, so they try to closely guard that kind of stuff. I regularly get into open records fights with them. I probably file at least one freedom of information act request a week, and half the times they don’t comply. [I]t’s real expensive to fight them because we have to get our lawyers on the phone…so half of those battles we lose. (Young, Interview12-8-98)

Struggling for the adequate information to do their jobs is part of the routinized daily experience of being in news media. Trust was described as a major factor. Establishing a relationship between educators and journalists was largely stated on individual terms. A new superintendent, a new public relations person would cause the relationship to have to be wholly re-negotiated. As part of the ritual of information exchange, administrative staff would provide a modicum of access to information in exchange for the assurance from reporters that at least they would convey their side. In the words of a broadcast editor:

[It’s] the nature of what we do daily. We react a lot to “911 stories’ If we hear of a crime being committed on or near a campus, we run. People are drawn to stories about kids. So when we arrive on the scene, their job is to tell us and our viewers that it has nothing to do with the day-to-day operation of the school. And they’re right . And most people know that. But they get upset that what happened will paint a negative picture when they should be working on helping get the information out. When they look good, it shows. When they are less than helpful, it adds another wedge in the relationship. (Manta, email, 8-17-99)

This pre-structured aspect of educational storytelling is acknowledged by principals as well:

Most of them [journalists] came in and told stories with their slant, but were willing to tell, “well this is an unusual incident, or this is an isolated incident.” That’s a favorite saying. But at least they were willing to do that. “The principal says that this is an isolated incident’. [Or they’d say] having talked to a couple of students, or having been in a class where everything seems normal...(Maxwell, 12-17-98).
A dance, in which each party already knows their moves is played out in almost-scripted fashion every time a school story is covered.

Although school officials acknowledge their designation as “public territory” this creates a unique tension because minors are involved.

Well, if it's a news issue, remember it's [the public schools], I can't speak for the private schools, but [the public schools], that's public territory. Now that doesn't mean the news crew has the right to come in and tape anywhere. They can't go in the classrooms or wherever, but they can stand at the top of the hill and shoot the campus and, but we sometimes when we weren't happy with the news media and the way they were twisting stories, we'd make them stay up there. But, they'd stop any kid that came by then and ask them what the story was and it may be somebody who didn't know a thing. And they told you that to begin with. I'm going to stop the kids as they come out and I'm going to ask them, so I'm going to put their story on instead of yours. And you had to make a decision then. But, they're really supposed to have your approval to come on campus and to talk to kids. But if they're not on campus, they can stop anybody on the street, and that's what they say they do with the kids. “Well he was up on the street, we were just asking him what he thought.” They can kind of do that, but they're supposed to have the parent's permission to, if the student is under 18. Which of course, most of the students are. Well, they never get parents permission and I have known parents who have called me later and said did you give permission for my kid to be on TV and I said no, of course I wouldn't do that. They said good, and they've gone after the media. (Maxwell, 12-17-98).

Journalists, understand the issues, but sometimes, under deadline or duress (much like many educators interpretations of copyright laws) it is not strictly adhered to. In the words of a newspaper reporter.

One thing that we have to do is for everybody under 18 we have to get their permission, that rule is kind of loose. It depends on the story. It depends on a lot of things. [I]f you are going into schools, the school district pretty much won’t let you talk to kids unless there is a permission slip signed. Most schools do have permission slips signed. That’s in the packet of stuff they send home with kids at the beginning of the school year. You know, we can give your kid aspirin, if the media comes, can the media talk to your kid or photograph your kid. Most do sign it unless it is like a special ed. kid or if there is family problems or whatever. [I]f I arrange a school visit, they usually check that they have those slips beforehand. In the greater scheme of things, if I’m out and about in the community and I see a 15 year old kid and I ask that kid what they think about the latest fashion trend and the big clunky shoes, I can pretty safely ask that kid that and…I don’t worry about getting parental permission. But we had a photographer who took pictures of just two kids playing in the leaves, probably…about 12 years old. [He] didn’t get permission … and had a father call upon the phone threatening to sue because there was a divorce situation and the mom was mad because the father didn’t get permission for that picture to run in the paper. (Young, Interview12-8-98)
Minors represent a potential legal liability. When filming juvenile offenders in court, broadcast news must be careful to only film their hands. “Children are hard interviews, very hard” because of their youth and their tendency to give short answers such as “yeah” (Fields, Interview 12-30-98). However, “you want to get kids in if you can with a school story…you want to humanize it” (Fields, Interview 12-30-98). The push to humanize stories by including youth, is one way that young bodies are struggled over as cultural markers of public territory.

Another locus of control is the community reception of the story. A journalist logs on a story and moves on to the next. However, schools must contend with the story as an addition to their representational grid. A principal discusses the reaction of parents.

Well parents, of course, when something happens, want to know what the situation is. I’ll say that for the most part, like 99% of the time, the parent's have called, I heard this on the news, what's going on. That's what they do, instead of making a judgement call and they would listen to what I have to say and most of the time, they’d so oh, okay, thanks. In other words, they know from the news media whatever the situation is played up like someone had just shot a scud missile in there or something. Which isn't true and you want to be straight with the parents too. Because the kid is going to eventually get home and the parent's going to say I talked to the principal today and he said this happened, is that what happened? And you want that to be the truth, otherwise you'd have a problem tomorrow. You don't want to lie and manage the situation, you want to be honest with them. But, most of the parents are very fair handed. Some of them would prefer to believe the news story rather than what we had told them, but not many. Very, very few. And even when individual kids are involved and their parents came up or called or whatever, virtually all of the time the parents were very cooperative and helpful. It's just a matter of time and dealing with that. And you know you have to deal with the parent's of the people who are directly involved in something, but the other 1300 parents make it very difficult if we have to talk to them individually. (Maxwell, Interview 12-17-98).

The “public” status of schools and news media leaves them in a precarious tension with each other. Control over storytelling is haggled over by journalists and educators, with each feeling vulnerable to the vagaries of the other. But conceptions of public character are not static, they change through time. The public character of both journalism and education are shifting in a flux of increasing consumer identity. In essence both are competing for ratings.
For example, both television news and public schooling are currently being reshaped through market driven policies. "Journalists frequently complain about having inadequate time or insufficient resources to thoroughly probe complex issues"


There’s a rising level of concern about the degree to which work in the newsroom is pressured and shaped and interfered with by the pressures of the marketplace. (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 66)

Strong ties to advertising and the advent of cable television in the 1980’s have led television shows to increase “target” marketing (Turow, 1997). Instead of envisioning a “mass market” the audience is conceived based on categories of: income, gender, age, race and ethnicity (Turow, 1997). The target demographic of most local broadcast news is articulated as a female consumer between the ages of 18-49 or 25-54 (Fields, Interview 12-30-98). Private schools, voucher systems, charter school programs, and an emphasis on “school choice” illustrate a changing notion of “the public”, beyond merely tax dollars, in terms of schooling as well. Alternatives to traditional public schooling which give parents more discretion about where to send their children are rapidly increasing (Goldhaber, 1999). The public in both instances is becoming more firmly articulated through the lens of consumer identity.

The growing tendency to base more and more aspects of social affairs on the notion of consumer rights rather than upon citizen rights involves more than a move from public-provided systems of state education toward individual schools competing for clients in the marketplace. While seeming to respond to critiques of impersonal over-bureaucratic welfare state provision this also shifts major aspects of education decision-making out of the public into the private realm with potentially significant consequences for social justice. Atomised decision-making within an already stratified society may appear to give everyone formally equal opportunities but will actually reduce the possibility of collective struggles that might help those least able to help themselves…Because of this transfer of major aspects of the educational decision making from the public to the private sphere undermines the scope for defending the interests of discouraged individual and groups and thereby potentially intensifies those groups’ disadvantage. (Whitty, 1997, pp. 92-93)

The increase of consumerist identities is emblematic of what Hall (1994) refers to as “new times.” New times refers to social, economic, political and cultural changes of a deeper kind now taking place in western capitalist societies (223)…[I]t is an attempt to capture,
within the confines of a single metaphor, a number of different facets of social change” (223). Societies are becoming more global, less geographically rooted, more highly technologized; labor is becoming more specialized and situated in the service sector, consumerism is continually rising, and gaps between rich and poor are deepening. Choice programs are developing within the context of these broader socioeconomic movements.

The pressures that led to governments adopting programmes [sic] of choice are real and will not disappear even with changes in government. They are connected with deep-seated changes in our societies, including a better educated and more demanding public, increased cynicism about institutions, varied patterns of living and communication, a decline in the unquestioned respect for traditional authorities, and the growth of consumerist mentalities. (Levin & Riffel, 1997, p. 57)

One way to understand the present reading of negativity towards schools is to see it as part of the growth of mistrust in the institutions which have shaped this nation, creating a certain “public state of mind”

The public’s state of mind… stemmed from several sources including a high degree of economic insecurity occasioned by corporate America’s adjustment to fierce global competition and the need to deliver products and services at the lowest possible cost. The pain of downsizing and restructuring along with that of stagnating wages, guaranteed that Americans would feel off balance, buffeted by forces beyond their control and unsure of their future…The overarching mood is one of economic anxiety, moral ambiguity, and institutional mistrust. (Wadsworth, 1998, p. 60).

Although public education, public schools themselves, are often articulated as the signifier for this anxiety, they are perhaps simply the most readily available symbolic vehicle for understanding dramatic changes in contemporary life. Berliner and Biddle (1998) suggest that in this current context negative portrayal of schools plays into the hands of privatization.

Public educators, particularly in urban high schools feel this struggle acutely as evidenced by a high school teacher in a neighborhood school as he discusses the development of charter schools and schools of choice.

You’re competing. You’re competing, you’re setting schools up to compete against one another. And that’s what I hear our principal saying. That we better find a focus, because if we don’t _____, _____, or ____ (lists 3 other neighborhood high schools) are going to find a focus and then we’re going to be the receptacle for all the kids who either flunk out of those schools, or don’t like the focus, so we’re going to be the receptacle for those students. And that sets up
competition. And I think competition may be good in the business world, but I think it’s a killer in education. Because when you have competition, that means you have winners and you have losers. You can’t afford to have losers in education. And when you do that, then we’re setting up a system in our country where you have 2 classes of, a serious 2 class set up, where the underclass is really the uneducated and then you’re screwed. So I don’t see competition as being the way out. And that’s the impression I’m getting. (O’Rourke, 11-24-98).

This marketization of education has led to increased discussions about whether or not the democratic nature of public schooling is at stake through market driven practices. (Tooley, 1997; Edwards & Whitty, 1997). On one side, it is argued that school “choice” programs, as discussed in the educators comments above, will further stratify society. “[P]rivileged producers and consumers will continue to search each other out in a progressive segmentation of the market (Edwards & Whitty, 1997, 40). Any practice which further stratifies society into disparate camps socioeconomically does not promote a radical democratic vision. The question becomes, is there a way to offer choice, without sacrificing the ideal of equality?

On the other hand it has also been argued that a greater common good can be achieved only by moving away from government control (Tooley, 1997). Diversity can not be acknowledged and have the ability to flourish as long as education is “public” and under government control. Rather than viewing current emphasis on school choice as an automatic, destructive fragmentation of the public sphere, such changes are seen as ways to meet diverse needs. This viewpoint is perhaps overly optimistic, because it does not acknowledge the rise of normalizing, disciplinary power, as described by Foucault. Through increases in standardized tests and other bureaucratic procedures the state can exercise normalizing power and surveillance, without being directly involved in schools.

Finally, another viewpoint suggests that, “given the many pressures on schools to maintain the status quo… providing choice of schools will not result in large changes to education” (Levin & Riffel, 1997, 57).

Most measures taken [by schools in response to parental choice] will be aimed at maintaining the status quo—largely steps to ensure that enrolment does not drop. Few schools will embark on large changes in their work. The core activities and
structures of schooling will not be called into question. Competition will be in terms of the fringes rather than the core of he enterprise. (Levin & Riffel, 1997, p. 57)

Market-driven education is not perceived to change or disrupt the institutionalized nature of education itself. According to this view, the lines being re-drawn around public and private entities are primarily cosmetic, and will not effect what school is. This is a sobering thought.

For most of the twentieth century, public education enjoyed a common sense understanding as a necessary tenet to a free, democratic society. The historical struggles (e.g. Jefferson, Mann) to construct such a system in the first place are mostly absent from contemporary public debates about public school choice. Wildavsky & Malkin (1998) suggest that the distinction between whether a good is public or private, though not arbitrary, is socially constructed (Wildavsky & Malkin, 1998). Nothing is essentially public in character unless people decide to make it so. It is important to realize that voices arguing for more school choice, new school structures include members of the far left and far right. Many of those who have been traditionally marginalized by racial, ethnic and class lines desire better schools. Their voices and concerns cannot be ignored. However, as the debate for school choice continues within the murky confines of representations about education, it is essential that a sense of public space, of a desire for a common bond, not be totally eroded.

**Conclusion**

Though urban educators and news media can regulate their working relationships through routines and rituals, the sources of antagonism will not disappear. An increase in consumerism and consumeristic identities is reshaping both news media and journalism in ways that narrow the space in which stories about urban education can be told. Rather than simply bashing journalism for its negative portrayals of schools, it makes more sense to understand the socioeconomic forces shaping both education and journalism and operate proactively within them. Educators who understand the parameters of journalism will be
able interact in a more savvy, less frustrating way with reporters. As one teacher stated, “I think educators could learn a lot from Princess Diana” (Randall, Interview, 11-24-90).

Besides simply understanding the ritual aspects of dealing with news media, educators should also learn to construct their own school stories and make them available for public consumption. Communication with parents, with other community members and with news media should be an aspect of a contemporary preservice teacher program.

School choice initiatives are here. Public education cannot and will not be able to stand as the monolith to public progress as it once did. Unfortunately, at stake is the structure of public schooling itself, not the discourses and practices which may have defined it in oppressive ways. It seems somewhat inevitable that the shape of public schooling must change, but what is at stake here are larger issues about societal understandings over teenagers, and their place in democracy. Within this context it is essential that educators see themselves as cultural workers advocating for youth, and prepared to engage in the complex, uphill battle of carving out spaces of dignity and safety for them to learn and mature in.

Chapter Five is a discussion of the ways in which pre-service teachers “read” their experience student teaching in an urban setting. Although the teachers were impelled to teach in an urban high school because of a desire to see their job as public service, they were not provided with the cultural tools, or intervening narratives to sustain their desire. Most of them had to resort to “common sense” narratives of negativity and lack to explain their experiences.

Notes

1 The attempt to “erase” Rodney King and other images of racialized brutality can be seen as evidence for the postcolonial criticism, “that it is endemic within modern imperial states to enforce a denial of people’s past histories in the name of an illusory national unity of the present…there is a privileging of an imagined community” (Trend, 1995, 9). Rodney King is invoked by the power structure as an example of dangerous memory that must be forgotten, as if it has no bearing on the present, however the video image will not let audiences forget. In a media event, metanarratives such as the Rodney King beating take over, even without actual viewing of the videotape as this news article excerpt illustrates. “Daphne Sloan, executive director of the Walnut Hills Redevelopment Corp., will not view the arrest tape because “I don’t need to see another black man being beaten by a group of three or four white men”” (Curnette & Hopkins, 1995, May 6, A3)
Another tense moment came when Tieger [prosecution], through his question, implied that a separate defense witness was motivated to testify on Crosby’s behalf because of her feelings about the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. His question came during the cross-examination of Elois Flowers, who watched Crosby’s arrest from a third-floor balcony at the Cincinnati Commerce Center. Flowers, who was in Los Angeles during the 1991 beating of King, testified that Crosby was complying with all the officer’s orders and never was abusive to the officer, whom she said was responsible for starting the scuffle. Tieger’s question about the King incident brought Keys and his co-counsel William Al-Uqdah [defense attorneys] to their feet. ‘Objection!’ both shouted at the same time. ‘Now the state’s playing the race card, your honor,’ Keys said. Tieger said he posed the question to reveal a potential bias. Nurre [judge] overruled the objection, and Flowers admitted that she thought the officers were wrong to beat King. But she said that incident had no bearing on her testimony, even though she began writing down the identifying numbers on the police cars as soon as they arrived and kept track of the activity of each officer. ‘It was going to be a mess, and I knew it,’ she said. ‘I wanted to make sure I had the details right.’” (Delguzzi, 1995, October 25, B6).

During Pharon Crosby’s trial, out of a jury pool of 50, only five individuals had not seen the video footage. Most of the potential jurors reported seeing it five times or more. (Delguzzi, 1995, October 18, B1) Everyone I interviewed remembered the Pharon Crosby news story and video, although it had happened three years prior to our discussion.

In “Los Angeles: A Tale of Three Videos” Fiske (1993) utilizes three videos: the arrest and beating of Rodney King, a black man, by white police officers, the beating of Reginald Denny, a white man, by black youths; and the shooting of Latash Harlins, a black teenager, by a Korea woman Soon Ja Du in order to analyze the way meanings are constructed and deployed to ascribe social power, primarily around the signifier of “race.” Although it was acknowledged that violent events really happened in which people were effected bodily, the videos were not presented as clips of reality. Instead the technology itself was questioned for the types of viewer access it engaged. In the case of Rodney King, certain instances of the video were re-technologized by being frozen or inscribed with explanatory arrows and circles (p.127). The store camera which viewed the shooting of Latasha Harlins already positioned the spectator from behind and thus in favor of the clerk (p.159). Fiske refers to the original videos as the “videolows” and re-technologized versions as ‘videohigh” (p.127). Through the process of creating a “videohigh” and framing it through various commentaries (such as Rush Limbaugh’s “looping” over and over of the first few seconds of the Rodney King video to highlight a logic for the officers response [p. 131]) a fairly “straightforward” video tape can be made to tell many different stories, moving away from its originary focalizations.

In Ang's study of Dallas one of the viewing positions reported by audiences was the deployment of irony. "On the one hand, the ironisers can have pleasure without guilt, in the sure and certain knowledge that they know mass culture is bad, and by knowing this, they are protected from its harmful effects…in spite of this, they cannot escape its seduction" (Storey, 1999, 84). Although this is a different context, the idea of the ironic viewer, who is secure in knowing that a televusual text is (in the case of the Crosby videotape) is exploitive “a travesty”, and yet still watches illustrates a similar phenomenon. Despite a consistent acknowledgement from those I interviewed that the tape was played too much, there was no indication that the tape was not watched, that the television was turned off in response.

I interviewed a young reporter, who described her initial reaction to being assigned the school beat. She suggested that it usually takes a year in order to learn a beat well. However, she reported having an opportunity to attend a conference at the University of Maryland as a great influence on her ability to cover her beat. She gained insight into story ideas, as well as possible sources.
I think it is important to note here, as illustrated by Chapter Three, “school stories” are not simply about school and representations of urban education are not only based on direct linkage of the school. For example stories of crime and urban youth are also traced back to the school, despite a lack of direct connection to schools or schooling.

The perception that the news rarely ever portrays issues such as poverty and their effect on education was expressed by Levin and Riffel (1997) as well. “In addition to personal contacts, images of issues, often as filtered through media portrayals, can have powerful effects on people’s conceptualisations [sic] of the world around them. For example, concern about increased levels of violence in schools has been fed by insatiable media interest in all such incidents. Poverty, a much more powerful influence on outcomes, receives much less attention” (50). However, the difficulties of “representing poverty” are brought to light in this excerpt from a community worker in a predominantly Appalachian neighborhood: “[T]here was an article, I believe in ______, and it was not just an article, it was like, 4 pages, pictures and all. [I]t was a feature… a huge piece. [W]hat this guy did was…he actually walked the streets and then told his story through his own eyes, what he was seeing. And I can understand some of the things that he saw that fit the stereotype and that definitely don’t portray the best image of the neighborhood or the people. But, he only showed one side of it. It certainly was not, it was not objective and it was probably meant to be more of an opinion piece. But, I was taught not to do that. I mean I’ve always been taught that when you write a story, you write both sides. You approach it as an objective third party and so I was really upset by that … [H]e went to the [an elementary school] cafeteria and … he wrote about this little boy who was scarfing down his breakfast like he’d never eaten in his life, and his shirt, his T-shirt was stretched over his malnourished belly and, it was …not only blown out of proportion, but it was highly offensive to the mother and father of that little boy who do everything in their power to feed him and take care of him and buy him new clothes” (Interview 11-30-98). Poverty like anything else, cannot be represented outside of dimensions of culture and ethnicity. Perhaps much like the tour guide metaphor in Chapter Two, the reporter already knew what poverty looked like, and what he would see before entering the neighborhood.

Discussing how schools as organizations perceive a changing world Levin and Riffel (1997) suggest that “People were more attuned and more likely to remember individual stories and incidents than they were to use or recall statistical data or formal research results” (50). In other words, “Little Susie” stories, in which there is an individual to perceive the world through (e.g. Pharon Crosby) have the possibility of effecting public policy in dramatic ways.

"According to the Commission on Freedom of the Press" one of the five major things that a contemporary society should require of its press is "a representative picture of the consistent groups in society...this requirement would have the press accurately portray the social groups" (Siebert et al., 1963, 91). Gannett, which owns 75 newspapers around the country has mandated a practice it refers to as "mainstreaming", in which minority voices are sought for stories "that are not necessarily about race" (Greenstein, 1999, 82). This practice highlights the inherent tension of showing all sides. (e.g. "The constant search for minorities means that if you live in Greenville, and you've got an appropriately 'ethnic' last name, chances are you've heard from a News reporter. Consider Yuri Tsuzuki...[who] was quoted three times in 13 days...On September 14, she weighed in on the popularity of a local jogging path: "It's inspiring to me." On September 19, she appeared in the 'Lifestyle' section, expounding on the virtues of changing an area rug each season: 'It's very important to respect the seasons.' A week later, her comments on an upcoming Elton John concert made the front page: 'I think it's a good follow-up after Janet Jackson.' Never mind that Tsuzuki isn't an Elton John fan, and doesn't have any particular expertise on jogging or rugs" (Greenstein, 1999, 83-84). On the one hand this practice creates a vision of a more inclusive society, however, an emphasis on superficial responses do not delve into the real issues of representation in a culturally diverse society. When a highly racialized story such as the death of a black man soon after his arrest in 1997 appeared, the paper “did little besides report official developments, albeit on the front page” (85). In fact, although a reporter was assigned to investigate the case, according to Greenfield his stories were never published in the paper. This example highlights ways in which race can be centered in
journalist discourses, without being delved into deeply. The overarching narratives are remaining the same, making the counterhegemonic inclusion of difference unlikely.

I want to acknowledge that a strict distinction between notions of “public” and “private” are problematic on many levels. For example, the gendered nature of this split has been called into question. “The feminist challenge to mainstream liberalism has focused on the role of the distinction between the public and the private in maintaining as well as explaining and challenging the oppression of women. The public sphere, it argues, is largely the preserve of male participants. By contrast and relatedly, women are still widely considered to be suited to and hence responsible for the private sphere, to which they tend to be confined for part and sometimes all of their lives, but in which they still tend to be dominated by men” (Enslin, 1997, 229). Enslin suggests that the public and private “are not completely separable” (234) and that the “challenge [is] “to decide how the two are interrelated and how they ought to influence one another” (234). She writes in the context of political struggles within contemporary South Africa and attempts to outline possibilities for raising democratic debate about issues that overlap between public and private, such as autonomy for women. She suggests that “[b]y encouraging parents as members of a democratic public – indeed as members of different democratic publics debating their own traditions as well as bearers of authority in families to consider such issues – those traditions which prejudice the education educational and other interest of girls could be reconsidered” (234). She suggests the site of this discussion is a public debate “involving the media and community organisations, as well as exploration of these issues in schools” (234).

Wildavsky and Malkin (1998) deconstruct the idea of the “myth” of a purely public or private goods which is often used to anchor economic analysis. They suggest that there is no naturally inherent “good” that “it is not possible to objectively locate goods that have inherent properties which make them best suited for governmental provision” (47). The distinction between a public good and a private good are choices which are rooted in politics. Even the example of a lighthouse which provides light for navigation to all, without exclusion or choice, can become exclusionary based upon new types of navigational technology.