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DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AND DRUGS IN THE MEDIA

Craig Reinman & Ceres Duskin

"Jimmy is 8 years old and a third-generation heroin addict, a precious little boy with sandy hair, velvety brown eyes and needle marks freckling the baby smooth skin of his thin brown arms."

So began a front page feature in the *Washington Post* on Sunday, Sept. 28, 1980. The reporter, Janet Cooke, claimed that Jimmy had "been an addict since the age of five." She told of how Jimmy "doesn't usually go to school, preferring to instead to hang with older boys." When he did go, Cooke wrote, it was "to learn more about his favorite subject—math," which he planned to use in his drug dealing career. She noted the "cherubic expression" on Jimmy's face when he spoke about "hard drugs, fast money and the good life he believes both can bring." He sported "fancy running shoes" and an "Izod shirt." "Bad, ain't it, I got me six of these," the child reportedly told Cooke.

She described Jimmy's house in detail. There were addicts "casually" buying heroin everyday from Ron, Jimmy's mother's "live-in-lover," cooking it and then "firing up" in the bedrooms. "People of all shapes and sizes," a "human collage" including teenagers, "drift into the dwelling . . . some jittery, uptight and anxious for a fix, others calm and serene after they finally 'get off.'" These things were, Cooke wrote, "normal occurrences in Jimmy's world."

"And every day, Ron or someone else fires up Jimmy, plunging a needle into his bony arm, sending the fourth grader into a hypnotic nod." Cooke then quoted Ron on how he first "turned Jimmy on": "He'd been buggin' me all the time about what the shots were and what people was doin' and one day he said, 'When can I get off?'" She described Ron as "leaning against the wall in a narcotic haze, his eyes half-closed, yet piercing," and quoted him as answering Jimmy, "'Well, s---, you can have some now.' I let him snort a little and, damn, the little dude really did get off."

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"Six months later," Cooke wrote, the 5-year-old "was hooked." She quoted the boy as saying, "I felt like I was part of what was goin' down. . . . It (heroin) be real different from herb (marijuana). That's baby s—."

Cooke also quoted Jimmy's mother: "I don't really like to see him fire up. But, you know, I think he would have got into it one day, anyway. Everybody does. When you live in the ghetto, it's all a matter of survival. . . . Drugs and black folk been together for a very long time."

The mother had been routinely raped, Cooke wrote, by her mother's boyfriend, one such instance leading to Jimmy's birth and then to heroin use to blot out her growing pain. When her drug sources dried up after a bust, she turned to prostitution to support further heroin use. Cooke quoted the mother as saying that she wasn't alarmed by her son's dealing ambitions "because drugs are as much a part of her world as they are of her son's."

Cooke made the more general point that heroin use had "become part of life" among people in poor neighborhoods people who "feel cut off from the world around them"—often "filtering down to untold numbers of children like Jimmy who are bored with school and battered by life." Many kids "no older than 10," Cooke claimed, could "relate with uncanny accuracy" dealer names and drug nomenclature.

Cooke's story then offered a familiar litany of quotes to bolster and contextualize her story. Drug Enforcement Agency officials noted the influx of "Golden Crescent heroin." Local medical experts spoke of the "epidemic" of heroin deaths in Washington. Social workers observed how the lack of "male authority figures" and peer pressure combine to make such childhood tragedies common.

"At the end of an evening of strange questions about his life," Cooke concluded, "the calm and self-assured little man recedes" to reveal a "jittery and ill-behaved boy" who was "going into withdrawal." Ron then left the room, according to Cooke, and returned with "syringe in hand, and calls the little boy over to his chair." He grabbed Jimmy's "left arm just above the elbow, his massive hand tightly encircling the child's small limb. The needle slides into the boy's soft skin like a straw pushed into the center of a freshly baked cake. Liquid ebbs out of the syringe, replaced by bright red blood. The blood is then re-injected into the child." The final scene in Cooke's drama depicted little Jimmy "looking quickly around the room" and climbing into a rocking chair, "his head dipping and snapping upright again in what addicts call 'the nod.'"

The Story Becomes the Story

The Washington Post is not prepared to identify young Jimmy; Mayor Barry orders a city-wide search.

Two days after Cooke's story appeared, the *Washington Post* ran a fascinating follow-up article entitled, "D.C. Authorities Seek Identity of Heroin Addict, 8." Such a tragic tale of young life lost to drugs, so compellingly con-

veyed by Cooke and so prominently published by the *Post*, led to hundreds of outraged calls and letters to the paper and to local officials.

The then Mayor Marion Barry was "incensed" by the story and assigned a task force of hundreds of police and social workers to find Jimmy. It was later learned that the police intensively combed the city for nearly three weeks. Teachers throughout Washington checked the arms of thousands of young students for needle marks. Citizens from housing projects called in offering to help. A \$10,000 reward was offered. The police, supported by the mayor and the U.S. Attorney, threatened to subpoena Cooke in an effort to find and "save" the boy. The *Post* refused to identify Jimmy, citing First Amendment rights to protect confidential sources (*New York Times*, 4/16/81, p. A1).

The *Post* assigned an 11-member reporting team to cover all this, six of whom were told to search for another Jimmy, "on the theory that if there is one, there must be others" (Green, 1981:A13). Cooke and one of her editors searched for Jimmy's house for seven hours. For some unexplained reason, they never found it. Neither the police nor anyone else found Jimmy either. And, neither the other *Post* reporters nor anyone else ever found any other child addict.

Meanwhile, *Post* publisher Donald Graham congratulated Cooke. Bob Woodward, a senior editor who eight years earlier had broken the Watergate scandal, promoted her. The *Post* went on with its normal coverage of drug issues.

Six months later, on April 13, 1981, "Jimmy's World" resurfaced in a ceremony at Columbia University in New York, where it was announced that Janet Cooke had won the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing for her story. The next day, the *Post* published a piece proudly announcing Cooke's prize and reprinted "Jimmy's World" in honor of the occasion. The story noted that "Jimmy's World" had first met with shock and disbelief. But despite the fact that none of the massive follow-up efforts had ever turned up Jimmy, or anyone like him, the *Post* asserted that experts had confirmed the fact that heroin addicts of Jimmy's age were common.

For any American reporter, winning a Pulitzer—the journalist's equivalent of a Nobel Prize—is as good as it gets. Such prizes make careers, catapult people out of the grind of routine reportage into prestigious positions, often to fame and fortune. Journalism students fantasize about such feats. Competitive cub reporters across the country covet chances for front-page stories that might get noticed and nominated. Janet Cooke should have been ecstatic. As the world would soon learn, she wasn't.

Two days later, on April 16, the *Washington Post* published another front-page piece on "Jimmy's World":

The Pulitzer Prize Committee withdrew its feature-writing prize from *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke yesterday after she admitted that her award-winning story was a fabrication. . . . It was said to be based on interviews with the boy, his mother and his mother's boyfriend. Cooke now acknowledges that she never met or interviewed any of those people and that she made up the story of Jimmy. . . .

The *Post* lead editorial that day, "The End of the 'Jimmy' Story," began with a phrase unusual for papers of the *Post*'s stature: "We apologize." It went on to say that "This newspaper, which printed Janet Cooke's false account of a meeting with an 8-year-old heroin addict and his family, was itself the victim of a hoax—which we then passed along in a prominent page-one story taking in the readers as we ourselves had been taken in. How could this have happened?"

To find out, Executive Editor Ben Bradley invited the *Post*'s ombudsman, Bill Green, to conduct an independent "full disclosure" investigation. Green learned that the *Post* had been running many more routine stories about drug problems in Washington, and that Cooke had been researching the local heroin problem for some time. She took extensive notes to City Editor Milton Coleman. In describing her material she mentioned in passing an 8-year-old addict. Recognizing the print media equivalent of "dramatic footage," Coleman stopped her right there and said, "That's the story. Go after it. It's a front-page story."

Green discovered that when Cooke followed Coleman's instructions she was unable to come up with the young addict. Coleman sent her back out to find him. Again she could not. A week later Cooke told him that she had found another 8-year-old addict, "Jimmy," by going to elementary school playgrounds and passing out her cards. She told her editor that one of her cards found its way to a mother, who called and angrily asked, "Why are you looking for my boy?"

Cooke then extracted promises of confidentiality for "Jimmy's" mother and told her editors that she had visited the child's home, according to Green's report. She soon turned in a 13-page draft of the story. She rendered the furnishings and other aspects of the home and "Jimmy's" life in such delicious detail, Green found, that no editor had ever asked for "Jimmy's" or his mother's identity. Editor Coleman later told Green that he went over the story carefully: "I wanted it to read like John Coltrane's music. Strong. It was a great story, and it never occurred to me that she could make it up. There was too much distance between Janet and the streets."¹

Green came to feel that the *Post* had been blinded by its ambition for a dramatic feature and by the fine prose of a reporter who was black and thus assumed trustworthy on such matters. Editors dismissed doubts and decided to run "Jimmy's World." It was not until Cooke was awarded the Pulitzer that the story started to unravel. Even then, questions centered on her background, not her story.

The first clue emerged when Cooke's earlier employer, the *Toledo Blade*, wanted to run the prizewinning story. In setting up a sidebar on Cooke's Toledo roots, *Blade* editors discovered that the biographical information they had received over the Associated Press wire "did not jibe" with what they knew of Cooke's background. Her "official" resume—sent in by the *Post*, released by the Pulitzer Committee, and carried with the AP story—had Cooke graduating from Vassar magna cum laude, studying at the Sorbonne,

earning a masters degree from the University of Toledo, speaking four languages, and winning half a dozen Ohio newspaper awards.² When the editors at the *Blade* called AP to check on the discrepancies, AP editors began to ask questions of their own. They discovered other discrepancies. No Sorbonne. No masters degree. They called Cooke. She asserted that her official resume was correct. AP knew at this point, according to ombudsman Green's report, that "something was wrong."

Prompted by the AP inquiry, Green discovered, the *Post*'s editors compared her personnel file and the Pulitzer biography form she filled out. After discovering that the two did not match in several respects, Bradley told Coleman to "take her to the woodshed." Coleman took Cooke for a walk and grilled her. Cooke eventually admitted she had not graduated from Vassar but continued to insist that everything else, especially the Jimmy story, was true.

Coleman phoned his superior with these answers, according to Green's report. Bradley told him to bring Cooke back to the *Post* via a side entrance "to avoid being conspicuous" and to sequester her in a vacant office three stories above the newsroom. Bradley came up and grilled her. He asked about the foreign language skills she had listed on her resume: "Say two words to me in Portuguese," Green quoted Bradley as saying. She couldn't. Her French wasn't much better. He asked about the journalism prizes. Her answers were inconclusive. Bradley said, "You're like Richard Nixon, you're trying to cover up."

In another office, Assistant Managing Editor Bob Woodward joined deputy Metro Editor David Maraniss, and another editor to go over the 145 pages of Cooke's notes and two hours of tape-recorded interviews. According to Green's report, they found "echoes" of the "Jimmy" story, but no evidence that she had actually spoken with a child addict.

Meanwhile, under pressure of intense questioning, Cooke gave Coleman what she claimed were the real names of Jimmy, his mother, and her boyfriend, as well as their address. Coleman and Cooke went there, but, as had been the case six months before, she somehow could not find the house. (Forgotten at this point in the investigation was the fact that in the immediate aftermath of her story, Cooke had been unable to find the house, returning the next day claiming to have found it but that the family had moved.)

It was nearly midnight when they got back to the *Post*. By this time, according to Green, each of the editors who had bought the story all along had become convinced that she was lying. Woodward then confronted Cooke: "It's all over. You've gotta come clean. The notes show us the story is wrong. We know it. We can show you point by point how you concocted it." Cooke continued to deny it. The more Woodward yelled, the more stubbornly she stuck to her story.

Exhausted from failed interrogations, they left Cooke in the room with only her closest colleague, Maraniss. Cooke knew that he knew, according to Green. They talked quietly for an hour about how tough it was to succeed at a national newspaper (Bradley called it "major-league journalism" or

"hardball") and how far they had come. After she had tiptoed all around a confession, Maraniss gently pushed Cooke by asking her what he should tell the others.

She broke down. "Jimmy's World" was, she finally admitted, "a fabrication." "There was no Jimmy and no family. . . . I want to give the prize back," Green quoted her as saying. Maraniss told the others. Bradley asked him to get a written admission and a resignation. Cooke complied.

The Lessons Learned

Where does the blame lie: breakdown in editorial procedure, pathological ambition or systematic prejudice?

The ombudsman's report (Green, 1981) was the second longest article ever published in the *Post*. Its conclusions were that warning signals were ignored, that senior editors were uninformed, that competition for prizes had pushed an ambitious young reporter too hard, and that the result was "a temporary lapse." The majority of the *Post* editors and reporters interviewed agreed, interpreting this lapse in terms of ambition and competition.

The *Post* editorial accompanying the first admission of the fraud framed the whole affair in terms of the breakdown of normal journalistic editing procedures—"quality control," Green later dubbed it. The writers thus implied that this was the ultimate cause of the fraud and expressed the hope that it would be seen as the aberration it was, thereby leaving intact the *Post*'s "prized credibility" (*Washington Post*, 4/16/81).

Other newspapers, of course, closely covered the scandal and offered similar interpretations. The *San Francisco Chronicle* (4/19/81) blamed the *Post* editors for trusting their reporters too much. The *Los Angeles Times* (4/19/81) blamed the fraud on the growing use of unnamed sources, a practice it claimed arose during the Vietnam and Watergate debacles. A few days later an *L.A. Times* columnist went further to opine that the lesson of the Cooke fraud was that the Watergate-era spirit of "gung-ho press investigators" needed to be reversed (4/23/81).

According to the *New York Times* (4/23/81, p. 16), the 600 editors who attended the annual convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors a week after the scandal broke talked of little else. They expressed a variety of concerns about the "loss of credibility for all newspapers." But almost all supported the ombudsman's principal conclusions that the scandal stemmed from "internal pressures" to "produce sensational articles and to win prizes" and from the failure to use the editing and checking "system that should have detected the fraud." Some editors added that the scandal had "forced them to re-examine" the procedures for checking the background of new reporters and the use of unidentified sources.

The *Post* itself (4/18/81, p. A3) published a summary of what other papers said about the Cooke affair. The core themes were the same: failure to

check confidential sources and the risks of putting sensationalism above editorial judgment. The *Post* story also quoted a *Wall Street Journal* piece which asked whether in all of these investigations "the hard questions" would be raised, but did not say what those questions were. The *Post*'s summary closed with a *Chicago Tribune* editor's rotten apple theory—like many others, he blamed the whole affair on "one highly unethical person."

Strangely, none of these accounts mentioned anything about the media's general assumptions and beliefs about drugs and drug users, which ultimately allowed Cooke's concoction to slip into print. For us, this is the hardest question, and it was neither asked nor answered in any of the press post mortems.

What of the Pulitzer Prize jury? Surely if the *Post*'s editors could suffer a "temporary lapse," at least one of the esteemed editors and journalists selected to serve on the prestigious Pulitzer jury should have detected some flaw in Cooke's story. As it turns out, a few of the jurors were concerned. One questioned Cooke's guarantee of confidentiality when a child's life seemed at stake. A second was troubled by the lack of attribution, but accepted Cooke's piece "on faith" because "it had gone through the editing process on a reputable newspaper." A third overcame her doubts because she felt the article "spoke to a very compelling problem of our time. We did not suspect that it was not what it seemed to be. *We had no reason to*" (*Washington Post*, 4/17/81, p. 9; emphasis added).

Still other jurors expressed doubts after the fact, but these centered largely on the unusual procedure by which Cooke's article had won. The *Post* had submitted it in the "general local reporting" category. The local reporting jury picked "Jimmy's World" second. The Pulitzer Board agreed with the jury, awarding that prize to another reporter. However, several Board members felt that the Cooke piece belonged in the feature category. After discussion, board member Joseph Pulitzer suggested that it be re-considered later in that category (Green, 1981).

Meanwhile, the jury for the feature-writing prize had selected three finalists and submitted them to the Board. None had ever seen the Cooke article. When the Board discussed overruling the jury in favor of "Jimmy's World," some members raised the familiar questions about the article. Their opposition "evaporated," however, when one member, distinguished African-American journalist Roger Wilkins, "eloquently" argued "that he could easily find child addicts within 10 blocks" of where the Board was meeting at Columbia University (*Washington Post*, 4/17/81, p. 9). Just as no one at the *Post* had challenged an articulate African-American reporter six months earlier, no juror challenged Wilkins' assertions about addiction in the inner city. Whatever questions they may have had about "Jimmy's World" were dropped. The Board overruled the jury and unanimously awarded Janet Cooke the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing.³

The Lessons Not Learned

What happens to the editorial 'crap detector' when newspaper editors are confronted with a drug story?

In all of this, no one ever turned up any concrete evidence that a child addict such as "Jimmy" existed. It is, of course, statistically possible that America's inner cities may somewhere contain a few 8-year-old addicts whose mothers' boyfriends shoot them full of heroin every day. But it is a virtual certainty that if such child addicts exist at all they are exceedingly rare. So for us, the most curious part of the Cooke scandal is that in the ensuing decade and throughout the dozens of press accounts we analyzed, no one has yet critically examined the underlying ideology that allowed her bizarre claim that such child addicts are common to pass unnoticed into publication and on to a Pulitzer.

No one doubts that Janet Cooke was a talented writer. No one disputes that the "Jimmy" story was compelling. And certainly no one questions that tragic drug problems persist across the USA, particularly in inner cities. Was it not reasonable, then, for the *Post's* editors to have been "taken in," and for even the prestigious Pulitzer jury to have become "victims of a hoax"? Who could have seen through a fraud perpetrated by an otherwise fine reporter whose pathological ambition led her to such thorough deceit?

We wish to suggest that the "Jimmy" story was, in fact, rather unreasonable on its face, and that the media would not have been "taken in" by it had they not been blinded by bias. We think that the *Post* editors and Pulitzer jurors—and virtually all the others in the news business who interpreted the scandal—*missed the point*.

The "hoax" to which the American media became "victim" was one they played a central role in making. Drug scares have been a recurring feature of American history. From the early nineteenth century until Prohibition passed in 1919, many in the press were willing handmaidens to the zealous moral entrepreneurs in the Temperance crusade. Newspapers and magazines often uncritically repeated wild claims that alcohol was the direct cause of most of the crime, insanity, poverty, divorce, "illegitimacy," business failure, and virtually all other social problems afflicting America at the time of its industrialization (Levine, 1984).

Throughout the twentieth century the media helped foment a series of drug scares, each magnifying drug menaces well beyond their objective dimensions. From the turn of the century into the 1920s, the yellow journalism of the Hearst newspapers, for example, offered a steady stream of ruin and redemption melodramas. These depicted one or another chemical villain, typically in the hands of a "dangerous class" or racial minority, as responsible for the end of Western civilization (see Musto, 1973; Mark, 1975; Morgan, 1978). In the 1930s, newspapers repeated unsubstantiated claims that marijuana, "the killer weed," led users, Mexicans in particular, to violence (Becker, 1963). In the 1950s, the media spread a story of two teenagers

in Colorado who had gotten high accidentally by inhaling model airplane glue. This led to nationwide hysteria, which in turn spread the practice of glue-sniffing (Brecher, 1972).

In the 1960s, the press somehow re-made "killer weed" into "the drop-out drug" (Himmelstein, 1983), and spread other misleading reports that LSD broke chromosomes and yielded two-headed babies (Becker, 1967; Well, 1972). The media that might have served as a source of credible warnings about the risks of drug abuse were dismissed with derision by the very users they needed to reach. In the 1970s, the press again falsely reported that "angel dust" or PCP gave users such superhuman strength that the police needed new stun guns to subdue them (Feldman et al., 1979). In 1986, the press and politicians once again joined forces on crack use among the black underclass. The drug was unknown outside of a few neighborhoods in a few cities until newspapers, magazines, and TV networks blanketed the nation with horror stories that described the crack high (Reinarman and Levine, 1989).

In each of these drug scares the media has consistently erred on the side of the sensational and dutifully repeated the self-serving scare stories of politicians in search of safe issues on which to take strong stands. And in each scare, including the current "war on drugs," reporters and editors have engaged in the *routinization of caricature*—rhetorically recrafting worst cases into typical cases, and profoundly distorting the nature of drug problems in the interest of dramatic stories.

A century from now historians may ponder this construction of drug demons just as they now ponder the burning of witches and heretics.⁴ But what is already clear is that a century's worth of scapegoating chemical bogeymen left even the very best journalists quite prepared to believe the very worst about drug users, especially inner-city addicts. Given such a deep structure of bias prevailing within media institutions, it is little wonder that Janet Cooke's story elicited so little of the press's vaunted skepticism.

Thus, her immediate editor Milton Coleman told the *Post's* investigating ombudsman that he "had no doubts" about "Jimmy's World" and that "it never occurred to me that she could make it up." Assistant managing editor and former Pulitzer winner Bob Woodward admitted similarly that "my skepticism left me," that his "alarm bells simply did not go off," and that "we never really debated whether or not it was true." The few doubts of the distinguished Pulitzer jury were washed away when one black voice asserted that "Jimmys" were everywhere in the ghetto. Even after the scandal broke wide open, ombudsman Green's thoroughly detailed report never really asked *why*, as he put it, "None of the *Post's* senior editors subjected Cooke's story to close questioning."

These things were possible, we contend, precisely because America's guardians of truth had no touchstone of truth on drug problems apart from their own scare stories. In this the *Washington Post* was no worse than most media institutions in the USA. When seen as part of the historical pattern of news "coverage" of drug issues, the Pulitzer Prize-winning fraud was less a

"lapse" than part of a long tradition. On almost any other subject, editors' "crap detectors" would have signaled that something was amiss.

The evidence for this contention oozed from every pore of Cooke's tale and was bolstered at every turn in the follow-up investigations. First, there were the shaky assumptions about addiction. Cooke alleged that "Jimmy" was "addicted" to heroin at age 5 and that he smoked marijuana before that. Children are curious creatures, so it is theoretically possible that a 4- to 5-year-old might push himself to learn to inhale foul-tasting smoke and hold it deep in his lungs repeatedly. It is even possible, although even less likely, that a 5-year-old could learn to enjoy snorting heroin powder into his nostrils day after day. What is hardly possible and highly unlikely is that a 5-year-old would ask to have a needle stuck into his "thin brown arms" more than once a day for the weeks it would take him to become addicted. One needn't be a drug expert for such claims to set off "alarm bells," one need only have seen a doctor try to vaccinate a child.

All this aside, if any journalists had checked, they would have found that most heroin users experience serious nausea the first few times they use. In addition to the difficulties posed by needles and nausea, a mildly skeptical editor easily could have discovered that drug effects are rarely unambiguously pleasurable early on. Drug "highs" are in many important respects acquired tastes that are teamed over time through processes that 5- or 8-year-olds are exceedingly unlikely to endure (Becker, 1953; Zinberg, 1984). Yet, after all of journalism had put this story-scandal under its microscopes, no one had even asked about such things.

Cooke's fiction contained a second set of what Green called "red flags," which had to do with assumptions about addicts. How moronic could addicts have to be (even crass "junkie" stereotypes depict them as shrewd) to allow a reporter from a top newspaper to witness them "firing up"? Even if criminalization had not made paranoia an occupational hazard of addicts, there is no evidence that they are proud of their habits. And in a home Cooke herself described as a dealing den and shooting gallery full of other addicts, no known drug is capable of inducing the magnitude of stupidity necessary for an adult addict to show a reporter how they inject heroin into their small child.

Let us leave this aside, too, and examine a third set of red flags. Neither *Post* editors nor Pulitzer jurors nor any of the other editors who both reprinted Cooke's article and later dissected the scandal ever seemed to question Cooke's claims that "Ron" routinely injected "Jimmy" and that his "mother" tacitly approved of this. Not even the tallest tales of Temperance crusaders gave us such villainous villains. What sort of people would knowingly and repeatedly inject heroin into a child that they clothed, fed and bathed?

There is nothing in the scientific literature to suggest that addicts recommend addiction to anyone, much less their own kids. The media apparently knew so little about heroin they could simply assume it induced depravity and transformed users into the sort of vile subhumans who think nothing of doing such things. Thus the media smuggled into their stories a simplistic

sort of pharmacological determinism. Clearly heroin can be powerfully addicting, but even if it were capable of morally lobotomizing all addicts, why would such addicts give away the very expensive stuff for which they reputedly lie, cheat, and steal?⁵

Almost any street junkie could have served as an expert informant (a "Deep Throat," if you will) and saved the *Post* from scandal. If the editors had picked ten addicts at random and asked them if a junkie would give away precious junk to a child, nine would have thought it absurd, moral qualms aside. Asked to read the Cooke story, most addicts could have told the *Post* immediately that it was concocted. Even if one accepted all of the other demonstrably dubious assumptions upon which the story rested, it made no sense even according to the perverse logic attributed to addicts.

A final set of red flags shot up immediately after "Jimmy's World" was published. According to the *Post*'s own follow-up stories, hundreds of police officers and social workers scoured the city looking for "Jimmy." Elementary school teachers inspected thousands of small student arms. Aroused citizens from housing projects in neighborhoods like "Jimmy's" all over Washington hunted for him. As Green's (1981) report put it, "The intense police search continued for 17 days. The city had been finely combed. Nothing." Half a dozen *Post* reporters also searched in vain for any other child addict. Our point here is not merely that none of these myriad searches turned up so much as a clue as to "Jimmy's" specific whereabouts. More significant is that with everyone so certain that "untold numbers of children like Jimmy" existed, no one found any child addict—not an 8-year-old, not a 10-year-old, not a 12-year-old.

For some reason these journalistic findings were not considered newsworthy. Presented with the choice of publishing the recalcitrant facts uncovered by their reporters or what they wanted to believe, *Post* editors and their print brethren chose to print the more ideologically compliant assertion that 8-year-old heroin addicts are common in America's inner cities. The Cooke affair thus suggests that the *Post* had more in common with President Reagan than it liked to believe. Reagan was fond, for example, of attacking "welfare chiselers" for buying vodka with their food stamps. No matter how many times his own experts told him this was untrue due to food-stamp redemption rules, he continued to tell the tale because it suited his ideological purposes. Lies uttered as political demagoguery are one thing, but we expect more from the great newspapers on which we rely to expose such lies. In continuing to insist that "Jimmies" were everywhere in the face of their own evidence to the contrary, the *Post* seemed to be saying, à la Reagan, that if "Jimmy's World" doesn't exist in reality, then it can be made to exist in ideology.

Unfortunately, the nonfictional lives of African Americans in our inner cities and of growing numbers of other poor Americans are sufficiently harsh that some of them seek solace, comfort and meaning in drugs. But editors seem to believe that readers don't like to be reminded that there is something fundamentally wrong with the social system from which most of them bene-

fit. Editors and readers alike, it seems, feel more comfortable believing that the worsening horrors of our inner cities are caused by evil individuals from a different gene pool—"addicts." Thus, a story about how crushing poverty and racism give rise to despair that sometimes leads to drug use, abuse or addiction is not considered "newsworthy." Stories that simply depict addicts as complicated, troubled human beings would be neither comforting enough for readers nor dramatic enough for prizes. To us, this sin of omission is more the real pity of this story than Janet Cooke's sin of commission.

About a week after the story first appeared and months before the scandal broke, *Post* publisher Donald Graham sent Cooke a congratulatory note on her "very fine story" (Green, 1981). It said, in part, that "The *Post* has no more important and tougher job than explaining life in the black community in Washington." Here he was as close to the ideal of journalism as Cooke's tale was distant from it.

Graham went on to praise the struggle of "black reporters who try to see life through their own eyes instead of seeing it the way they're told they should." In calling attention to the importance of independent reporting, Graham again articulated an important ideal. Ironically, Cooke had so internalized the way reporters in general "are told they should" see drug users that she gave a whole new meaning to the idea of seeing things through her "own eyes."

Finally, Graham wrote of how Cooke's article displayed the "gift" of "explaining" how the world works. "If there's any long-term justification for what we do," he wrote, it is that "people will act a bit differently and think a bit differently if we help them understand the world even slightly better. Much of what we write fails that first test because we don't understand what we're writing about ourselves." Here Graham displayed unintended prescience. For what he took to be a grand exception turned out to be a glaring example of his rule.

Cooke's concoction led readers to misunderstand the lives of addicts "in the black community." But hers was only an egregious case of the press's cultivated incapacity for understanding drug problems. If the *Post* scandal has value, it inheres in the accidental glimpse it affords into the nominally hidden process by which media institutions force the untidy facts of social life through the sieve of dominant ideology (Molotch and Lester, 1974). We submit that it is this process that allowed Cooke's tale to sail undetected past *Post* editors, Pulitzer jurors, and the hundreds of other journalists who analyzed the fraud. And we suggest that this process continues to camouflage the ways our world produces drug problems in the first place, and thereby helps to forge a public prepared to swallow the next junkie stereotype and to enlist in the next drug war.

Notes

- 1 By all accounts in Ombudsman Green's investigation, Janet Cooke was not street-wise. She was middle-class and upwardly mobile. Her immediate supervisor told Green that Cooke "was not really street-savvy—she was Gucci and Cardin and Yves St. Laurent—she didn't know the kinds of people she was dealing with, but she was tenacious and talented" (Green, 1981:A12).

- 2 The Vassar degree had caught Editor-in-Chief Ben Bradley's eye, causing him to sift Cooke resume from the hundreds he receives each week and to set in motion the hiring process which brought her to the *Post* (Green, 1981:A12).
- 3 The Pulitzer Board drew its own lesson from the Cooke scandal. Seven months later adopted new procedures to guard against such problems. Pulitzer juries would henceforth deliberate for two days instead of one (*New York Times*, 11/22/91).
- 4 The authors are indebted to Dr. Peter Cohen for the analogy to witches and heretics. Person communication, 1991.
- 5 To be fair, we did find one article (*New York Times*, 4/16/81) that at least mentioned the idea that addicts might not want to give away their heroin, but this lead was not pursued. As Mayor Marion Barry told the *Post* after the city-wide search that he doubted "the mother of the pusher would allow a reporter to see them shoot up" (Green, 1981:A13).

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