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Only in America

Throughout the 1980's and 90's, America was a struggling, learning country. The country battled with high crime rates, drug cartels, immigration, and gay and lesbian rights. Authors Malcolm Gladwell and Beth Loffreda aid in painting a picture of the many problems America was facing during this time, in both the big city and small town. In Gladwell's essay "The Power of Context: Bernie Goetz and the Rise and Fall of New York City Crime" he focused mainly on the big city and how environmental factors play a role in crime. Bernie Goetz shot four African American boys on a subway train and Gladwell argues throughout his text that tipping points in the environment surrounding Goetz are what triggered him to commit such a crime. Loffreda, author of "Losing Matt Shepard", centered her work around how crime affects the small town, and how the media also plays a role in the aftermath. When gay college student Matt Shepard was brutally beaten and left to die, the media took it upon themselves to add their own details to the story which really influenced the public. In both Malcolm Gladwell and Beth Loffreda's essays, the location of where a crime occurred, and the race and social class of the people involved with the crime served as tipping points toward the media's behavior.

Throughout Malcolm Gladwell's essay, he mentions several environmental factors he refers to as "tipping points" and how they impact society's behavior. "A tipping point is something physical, like for instance, graffiti. It urges a certain kind of behavior not from a specific person, but instead from a feature in the environment" (Gladwell 238). For example, graffiti in a subway car can lead criminals to think that no one is in charge and that they will be able to get away with committing a crime. In Beth Loffreda's essay, things said by individuals,

physical items, and other visual environmental factors serve as tipping points to evoke propaganda and bad journalism throughout the media covering the brutal murder of Matt Shepard. Gladwell's essay also introduces a theory invented by criminologists James Wilson and George Kelling called the "Broken Windows Theory". "The theory explains that if a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. This will lead to the breaking of more windows and a sense of anarchy will engulf the community" (Gladwell 237). The theory argues that crime is the ultimate result of disorder. With all the disorder and chaos encircling Laramie in the days following Matt Shepard's death, the media committed their own form of crime by misinforming audiences and viewers with their propaganda.

The media had a field day covering the shocking murder of a young, white, middle-class, college student that occurred in Laramie, Wyoming.

"In a few snapshots that circulated in the press, Matt appeared boyish, pensive, sweet, charmingly vulnerable in oversized wool sweaters- a boy who still wore braces when he died, a boy who looked innocent of sex, a boy who died because he was gay. The explanation was simple: Matt was someone people could identify with. Matt was the boy next door. He looked like everybody's brother and everybody's neighbor. He looked like he could have been anyone's son. He was the nuclear son of the nuclear family. White, middle-class America finally had it's own tragedy" (Loffreda 385-386).

This goes to show that because Matt Shepard was a member of the white, middle class, the media felt that they must extensively cover this story. "Matt was only one of thirty-three anti-gay murders of 1999" (Loffreda 384). Out of those thirty three how many of the victims were white males and a member of the middle class? (the class that the majority of America is

classified into and considers themselves a part of). The night Matt was kidnapped and brutally beaten, his captors preyed upon other victims as well. “After beating Shepard and tying him to a fence, the two criminals returned to town and got into a physical altercation with two Latino-American boys, beating one of them with the same gun Matt was beaten with” (Loffreda 368). No news stories ever mentioned this little piece of information. Was it because the boys were a minority? There was a media whirlwind after hearing about Matt Shepard for two reasons: Matt Shepard was a person a majority of the country could identify with because he was a part of the middle class and America was on the brink of gay rights, and this story was the first gay murder that other Americans would be concerned with because they could relate to him.

In Gladwell’s essay, a middle-class, middle-aged white man named Bernie Goetz was fed up with the constant risk of being mugged, minorities, and overall cleanliness of New York City. One day he simply got onto a subway bus and sat down next to four, young African-American men. The black boys started hustling Goetz for five dollars. This clearly was the last straw for Mr. Bernie Goetz, and he pulled out a gun, and shot all four boys. A few days later,

“the *New York Post* ran two pictures on its front page: one of Goetz, handcuffed and head bowed, being led into custody, and one of Troy Canty, one of the boys Goetz shot- black, defiant, eyes hooded, arms folded- being released from the hospital. The headline read, “Led Away in Cuffs While Wounded Mugger Walks to Freedom” (Gladwell 235).

In this case, yes Bernie Goetz was sick of being oppressed, but he was clearly the criminal. The media depicted him as a “hero”. “The tabloids dubbed Goetz the “Subway Vigilante” and the “Death Wish Shooter”. On radio call-in shows and in the streets, he was treated as a hero, a man who had fulfilled the secret fantasy of every New Yorker” (Gladwell 235). There is something disturbing underlying this statement. A man shoots four teenagers, and is considered a hero, and

the media portrays him as one. When Matt Shepard was brutally beaten and murdered, his attackers were viewed as criminals. Bernie Goetz uses a weapon to shoot not one but four human beings, and is looked at as the victim. This is just further proof that the media has an impact on what the general public believes. The media strives to appeal to the largest audience possible, which in America's case is, middle-class whites.

When Matt Shepard was finally discovered tied to a fence nearly two days after his beating, he was transferred from a hospital in Wyoming to a hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado to a hospital with a more sophisticated trauma unit. When the sheriff of Laramie finally released a statement about Matt Shepard, a media frenzy occurred. " Gary Puls, the sheriff of Laramie indicated that they thought Matt may have been beaten because he was gay. He also stated that Matt had been "tied like a scarecrow", which for the media gave the impression that he was tied up spread-eagle, splayed out" (Loffreda 370). The media portrayed Matt being tied up to the fence like a Crucifixion. This was untrue, for Matt's hands were tied behind him only four inches off the ground. The media incorporated this Crucifixion factor to make the ties with religion, and stir up anti-gay issues in the religious community. This was just the beginning of the propaganda of the Matt Shepard crime.

"Bob Beck, news director for Wyoming Public Radio said, "Right away, I saw pack journalism like i have not seen pack journalism in a while. It was really something. I remember going to the courthouse, and somebody would say, 'Hey I understand he got burned'- which wasn't true by the way- 'where did he get burned?' And somebody would say. 'Oh, on his face,' and they're all taking notes, and they were and they were the sources for each other. They would never say where it came from or who had the information- it was just 'there were burns on his face' .. The media had become a closed

loop, feeding off their own energies” (Loffreda 375 - 376).

Beck paints a clear picture of the media circus that was going on in the small town of Laramie. It is interesting to think that this much chaos was erupted from such a horrible crime, when a few years earlier, a prejudice middle class white man shot four black teenagers and a few weeks following the crime “..it seemed hard to remember precisely what it was that Goetz had once symbolized. It was simply inconceivable that someone could pull a gun on someone else on the subway and be called a hero for it...”(Gladwell 237). This further proves the argument that the location of big city versus small town plays a large role in how the media responds to a crime. Had anyone in America ever heard of the town Laramie Wyoming before Matt Shepard’s murder? The media became intoxicated with the story because there was nothing else to talk about in Laramie, Wyoming. The story of Bernie Goetz shooting four teens in a subway while several people spectated in fright stayed in New York’s media loop for a few days, where Matt Shepard was talked about every day for months on end.

The town of Laramie was also widely criticized by the media for not having a trauma center for adequate for circumstances like Matt’s. Authorities responded by simply explaining that the town had never had to deal with such an issue and such an advanced trauma unit was unnecessary. One of the benefits of living in a small town is not usually having to endure such tragic situations like the case of matt Shepard. “The day the guilty first appeared in court, the courtroom was filled wall-to-wall cameras, there wasn’t a seat left in the house” (Loffreda 372). This small town had never experienced something as horrific and tragic as the murder of Matt Shepard, and everyone wanted to witness. Gladwell’s essay states “When Goetz went to trial for the second time, the case was all but ignored by the press” (Gladwell 237). Incidents like Bernie Goetz sadly occur more often than one would hope in a large city, and this

was nothing new to the residents of the Big Apple. The press overpopulated the Shepard case simply because there was nothing else to do in Laramie, Wyoming. Goetz was all but ignored because he lived in one of the biggest cities in the world, and the media had moved on to bigger and better things. People didn't realize how long it would actually take the press to move on after the Matt Shepard case.

In several cases, the location of where a crime occurs has a huge impact on how the media behaves. In a small town the media has no other story to cover, so they cover that one story until viewers are sick of hearing about it. Whereas in large, highly populated cities, there are several things occurring at all times, and media stories are run once or twice and then quickly forgotten about. The media also portrays citizens in the media to appeal to its largest numbers of viewers: white, middle-class Americans. America was dubbed the "melting pot" a long time ago for its unique way of being able to incorporate one's culture and values with the culture and values of their new home. What is America coming to when the main focus of the media is to appeal to the white, middle-class, and portray minorities as criminals?