

Unschooling in the un-news

ABC News reporter Hyunju "JuJu" Chang has reported once again on unschooling¹. This is her second report on unschooling since April 2010 when she filmed a report on the Yablonski-Biegler family². Her second report features the family of Joe and Dayna Martin.

Critiquing this second report is probably a poor use of time because not only are the subject and the bias not news, they're not new. Unschooling is so old, cyber-culturally speaking, that the newsletter-magazine devoted to it, *Growing Without Schooling* shuttered itself in 2001 after 24 years³. As for report-bias, the second report repeated the slant of the first report almost as if the reporter used an outline. Because of the reach of the program on which it aired, Nightline, many people saw the program, so replies are in order.

Leaving aside unschooling itself, the overall points about the report that come immediately to mind are:

- sensational presentation
- biased editing
- unnecessary images of school
- reporter's gasps and astonishment

Sensationalist reporting is nothing new, just think of the late 1800s description of 'yellow journalism'⁴. And sensationalism is almost a requirement in the milieu of 24-hour 'news' channels and 500-channels that must fill their 24 hours of programming with *something*. That *something* must be interesting enough to compete with the programming on the 499 other channels, as well as with daily family life, books, music, movies in the theater and at-home, fitness routines, and the Internet. "Infotainment," as a word dates from 1983⁵, so that underscores the not-newness of sensationalism. But even knowing what the network employees are up to, and up against, I find it hard to watch the Nightline segment and then read the online text reports without sputtering, "Wait a minute!" When the reporter audibly gasps then exclaims at a stay-at-home child's admission that he goes to bed later than the working-mother-reporter's idea of what a child's bedtime should be, that exclamation shows a lack of separation between her reporting and her own opinions. Or she was hamming.

Keeping the bias in mind is especially important when you're reading a report about something that you're already not inclined to like, such as children who appear 'out of control'⁶. If 'out of control' kids are the concern, perhaps the reporters should look into the continuing rate of school dropouts, kids who, I presume, are not in a self-directed learning environment with caring parents. Over the decades the American dropout rate has declined, but it still rests at 8%⁷ of the 16,294,000 high school age teens⁸ (ca. 1,303,520 individuals).

Watching the Nightline report on the Martin family, and the Good Morning America segment featuring the Yablonski-Biegler family confirmed for me why I'm a non-viewer of television news programs: I recoil at reporters poorly manipulating my thoughts. I'd react better to a well-planned manipulation that makes me think (which is what most nonfiction writing intends, in one way or another) than to a report that presumes I will go along with sharply edited interviews rolling across the screen in mere seconds-long bursts.

My objections about the editing of the programs stem from seeing the same the 'playbook' particulars within the two reports:

- editing discrepancies between the video report and the written version of each program
- same contrast at the beginning between a schoolroom and kids at home
- same emphasis on 'no X, no Y, in fact no nothing at all!'
- same focus on children's bedtimes when the child is an 'owl' instead of a 'lark'⁹
- same focus on legality
- same truncated interview answers
- same recording of a field trip
- same highlighting of children eating 'wrong' food
- same questions on "what will happen when they're older?"
- same child-quizzing "do you want to go to school?"
- same challenging of the children as to the validity of their feelings and viewpoints

That looks like less like an enquiry and more like a checklist.

One difference between the two programs was of the 'how many homeschoolers are there?' variety. In the April program, the reporter guessed that parents unschool 150,000 children, but by the June program the reporter had 150,000 families unschooling their kids. How did the number of children increase so much between April and June? And why was the quantity the same number? And, since only 19 states report numbers of homeschooled children¹⁰, with no breakdown of the unschooled, who supplied the number? Of course, viewers who see the programs months apart won't distinguish between 'children' and 'families' even if they watched both programs, and even if they remember the number but the questions remain,

- who put together the number 150,000?
- where did the numbers come from?
- who was that analyst?

Concerning interest in unschooling, the programs could have used different jumping off points – that is, if the producers meant for the programs to inquire into something new to many people. What these 'news' programs seem to be doing is using the growing freak show television trend, a technique competing hotly with the 'can we shout at people loudly enough to make them cry?' gambit (or maybe gasp them into admitting their social deviance). Bonus for hyperventilation.

A starting point for reporting on unschooling might be to look at how far schooling itself has branched off from natural learning so that natural learning appears to be radical and irresponsible. Down through the millennia, people who want to make money from learning have co-opted the process – an example from antiquity being the Sophists¹¹. Today, basic compulsory schooling in America costs over a half-trillion dollars every year.¹² That's not million with six zeroes, or billion with nine zeroes, but trillion with twelve zeroes. Contrasting an unschooling household with a classroom is comparing two far ends. The reporter might have contrasted unschooling with school-at-home, summer school, or camp. Will family life without curriculum and classrooms look radical in the shadow of an industry whose yearly cost has twelve zeroes in it?

|← If 'just family life' is here ...

a half-trillion dollar industry in \$1,000 bills face-to-face is about 34 miles thataway¹³ →

Which end is the extreme?

There will always be differences within a group of individuals or among individual data points.¹⁴ If you line up all the leaves on a tree, some will be lighter, some will be darker, and most will be about the same hue, but you will be able to line them up, lighter to darker. Same thing with the height of individuals, number of peas per pod, worst-to-best ping pong players and smallest to largest chocolate covered raisins (eat the smaller ones first, save the big ones for last).

Maybe if the USA channel featured the Yablonski-Bieglers and the Martins on a television program the public would find them less threatening. Too bad that "Characters welcome" turns out in the 'real' world of television to be just a clever tagline.

For information on unschooling, please see:

- What is unschooling?¹⁵
- Unschooling – What's The Real Story¹⁶ (see comments for discussion)
- Unparenting and unschooling¹⁷
- Unschooling Stephanopoulos: Good Morning America Fail¹⁸
- Unschooling : How Good Morning America Got It All Wrong¹⁹

Notes:

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- ¹ “Unschooling: No Tests, No Books, No Bedtime,” 1 June 2010,
<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/unschooling-homeschooling-books-tests-rules/story?id=10796507>
- ² “Extreme Homeschooling: No Tests, No Books, No Classes, No Curriculums,” 19 April 2010
<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Parenting/unschooling-homeschooling-book-tests-classes/story?id=10410867>
follow-up report at: “Defending Unschooling: 'It's Not Anything Goes'” 20 April 2010,
<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Parenting/parents-defend-radical-unschooling-instilling-proper-values/story?id=10422823>
- ³ Growing Without Schooling, 1977 - 2001
<http://www.holtgws.com/growingwithoutsc.html>
- ⁴ PBS program on yellow journalism
<http://www.pbs.org/crucible/frames/journalism.html>
- ⁵ “Infortainment” at the Online Etymology Dictionary
<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?l=i&p=15>
- ⁶ Fear of out of control children is even less-new than sensationalistic reporting.
The Conflict of generations in ancient Greece and Rome by Stephen Bertman
http://books.google.com/books?id=5unqYgX0usIC&pg=PA15&lpg=PA15&dq=complaints+about+younger+generation+antiquity&source=bl&ots=F6_7cY0v5s&sig=4B6lk6s2fDDjMY73fRMS6195_o&hl=en&ei=PNMHTJXWOYv4NfeCuLUE&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false
- ⁷ “Percentage of high school dropouts among persons 16 through 24 years old (status dropout rate), by sex and race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1960 through 2008,” Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_108.asp
- ⁸ “Enrollment in educational institutions, by level and control of institution: Selected years, fall 1980 through fall 2008,” Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics
http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_002.asp
- ⁹ “Are you a lark or an owl?” Michael Gross, *The Guardian*, 4 Dec 2003
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2003/dec/04/lastword.health>
- ¹⁰ “Demographics,” A to Z Home’s Cool
<http://homeschooling.gomilpitas.com/weblinks/demographics.htm>
- ¹¹ *The sophistic movement*, by G. B. Kerferd
http://books.google.com/books?id=k40XsPwN8xcC&pg=PA26&lpg=PA26&dq=sophists+money&source=bl&ots=aFIBWM6h-x&sig=pJAOh3BLsl3Xv7eE-Hnzj9Tmm0o&hl=en&ei=WN4HTIC1DISKNba42bUE&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=8&ved=0CDgQ6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=sophists%20money&f=false
- ¹² Remarks by Secretary Paige at the Executive Leaders Forum, Committee of 100, San Francisco Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Department of Education, 28 June 2004
“It’s time we recognized a central, cardinal fact: education is a big business. It is a huge part of our economy, a large segment of our gross national product. Last year, as a nation, we spent more than half a trillion dollars on K-12 education. This was on the local, state and federal levels. Our nation’s educational efforts are a large financial endeavor—rivaling spending on the defense, agriculture, transportation, telecommunications or entertainment sectors.”
<http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/06/06282004.html>
- ¹³ Crash Course Chapter 11: “How much is a trillion?”, Chris Martenson
<http://www.chrismartenson.com/crashcourse/chapter-11-how-much-trillion>
- ¹⁴ “Normal probability distribution,” Statistics tutorial, Experiment-Resources.com
<http://www.experiment-resources.com/normal-probability-distribution.html>
- ¹⁵ “What is unschooling?” Holt GWS
<http://www.holtgws.com/whatisunschoolin.html>
- ¹⁶ Unschooling – What’s The Real Story?, Erica Krull, Family Mental Health
<http://blogs.psychcentral.com/family/2010/04/unschooling-whats-the-real-story/>
- ¹⁷ Unparenting and unschooling, Tammy Takahashi, Just Enough and Nothing More blog
<http://www.justenoughblog.com/?p=510>

¹⁸ Unschooling Stephanopoulos: Good Morning America Fail, Swiss Army Wife blog

<http://www.swissarmywife.net/2010/04/unschooling-stephanopoulos-good-morning-america-fail/>

¹⁹ Unschooling : How Good Morning America Got It All Wrong, Lee Stranahan, The Huffington Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lee-stranahan/unschooling-how-igood-mor_b_543880.html