

NEWS STORIES AND THE CREATION OF MYTHS: THE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF LANCE ARMSTRONG AS A MODERN ICARUS

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Abstract:

Studies on media and myth creation have argued whether mass media takes over the mythological system or mythic products appear only in certain media products, at certain periods of time. This paper enforces the perspective that all media products have a mythic status and examines the role of mass media in myth creation in modern societies through an analysis of the media framing of the cyclist Lance Armstrong as an archetypal figure. By reviewing significant events of his career and life, it is highlighted the process through which mass media portrays Lance Armstrong as a modern hero and furthermore, the role media played in his decay. After defining myth and examining how news stories are presented from the perspective of myth creation, this article analyzes the media-myth of the modern hero created around Lance Armstrong. The research strategy involves a qualitative content analysis of a set of journalistic texts collected from the American newspaper *New York Times*. Nowadays, modern societies are in need of constant new creations of mythological products to relate to. The media act as storytellers and have a vital role in creating myth products that evoke archetypal figures. This paper reinforces the fact that all media products are creations having a mythic status and that the function of mass media in modern societies is similar to the function of the institutions that produced myths in ancient societies.

Key Words: Media, myth creation, hero archetype

Introduction

The studies on media and media creation can be approached from two different perspectives. The first approach has derived from the evolutionist paradigm and states that, in modern societies, mass media act as a system that has taken over the functions of the institutions producing and passing on myths in ancient societies. The other approach is that mythic products appear at certain periods of time, only in certain media products (Rothenbuler & Coman, 2005).

This paper is based on the first theoretical model, derived from the evolutionist paradigm: modern media operates as a mythological system and fulfills the same role that was played by archaic societies, to create and share myths (Coman, 2003). The role of the media is to produce and pass on mythic products, by taking over the functions of ancient societies (Coman, 2003).

The theoretical background is represented by Mircea Eliade's studies on mythology, by Jack Lule's researches regarding the recognition of "epic perennial schemes" (2001, in Coman, 2007, p. 93) in journalistic texts, and by the essay published by Roland Barthes (1957) in the volume "Mythologies" – "Le Tour de France comme épopée".

The starting point of the analysis further presented in the paper is the following statement: "The Tour reaches, in many cases, an inhuman world: on Ventoux, it has already left planet Earth, it neighbors unknown stars (...) The Tour is a confrontation of characters, it needs individual morality (...) The Tour is the best example I have ever met of a total myth" (Roland Barthes, 1957, p. 106 - 111). According to Barthes (1957), The Tour of France is an Odyssey and participants have to overcome their human limits in order to conquer the mountain.

Lance Armstrong, the cyclist who has seven consecutive victories in this competition, can be seen with no doubt as the mythic hero of the Tour, a part integrating in this total myth. I argue that Lance Armstrong's transformation into a modern hero is also due to the fact that he is the central character of a total myth – the epic called The Tour of France – the evolution of the uncrowned king of cycling thus comes naturally. This paper will focus on the role played by media in building a mythological cyclist, presented as a modern hero whose return to sports represented the beginning of his downfall.

Theoretical perspective

The archaic myth and the mythologizing process in modern societies

Myth can be defined as a narration of “a sacred history, it recounts an event that took place during the primordial time, during the fabulous time of the beginnings (...) the archaic myth is the absolutely true and sacred history of supernatural beings” (Eliade, 1978, p. 5). According to Stith Thompson (1972, p. 173, in Coman, 2003, p. 90), “the myth has to do with the gods and their actions, with the creation and the general nature of the universe”.

People presented in myths are supernatural beings who have sacred powers. By describing these characteristics, the myth “becomes an exemplary model of all significant human activities (...) human behavior and profane activities find their models in the actions of supernatural beings” (Eliade, 1978, p. 6). Thus, it can be concluded that the main role of myth is to provide exemplary models of men, mythological characters are gods, heroes, beings with supernatural powers, they are not part of the normal, ordinary, everyday world (Eliade, 1978).

Roland Barthes (1957) defines myth, from a semiotic point of view, as a reference to history, both by form and by taking over historical concepts. The world provides the myth with a historical reality, which it restores through mythologizing. Myth has the power to immortalize historical events, things or people, to whom the society returns through reuse. After being mythologized, they lose their historic, ephemeral character and become a part of eternity (Barthes, 1957).

Regarding the myths presented in the modern society, Mircea Eliade (1978, p. 170) states that “certain mythical behaviors survive under our eyes”. Different mythical structures are reused by mass media and transmitted to the public, and “in media one can identify many mythical elements, characterizing ancient societies. Between the elements that make from the media-myth a replacement of the primitive-myth, can be named: social cohesion achieved by being a part of stories that evoke a certain reality or by imitating and idolizing archetypal patterns (Huynen, 1995, p. 142 in Coman, 2003, p. 87).

Moreover, in today's society one can see a “mythologizing process being similar to the one seen in primitive societies” (Eco, 2008, p 225), and the examples of mythologizing from the media are increasing both in number and significance (Eco, 2008). Media imposes in the society mythical structures of the images and behaviors of exceptional people. Modern heroes represent the ideal for an important part of the society, and their mythic behavior represents the well-known desire to overcome the human condition and the limits imposed by nature. Media mythologizes these people by transforming them, by presenting an exemplary image of them (Eliade, 1978).

Another definition of the representation of myths in the modern society is provided by Roland Barthes (1957, p. 179) – “a myth could be everything can be justified through a discourse”. According to the same researcher, the myth could be regarded as a “depoliticized speech”, where depoliticized refers to the real and social structure of human relationships that have the power to change the world.

Jack Lule (2001) believes that each society is based on several fundamental narratives that take the form of archetypes. Because people need these stories to define themselves, by referencing to them, in modern society, the role of archetypes is taken by the news stories presented by mass media. In addition, in modern societies, news stories have the same role as myths had in ancient societies: to maintain social order (Lule, 2001).

The model of the modern hero:

According to Jack Lule (2001), the myth of the hero is the most widespread myth of humanity; it forwards the core values and the ideals of the whole society. Human tendency is to take a life story as a paradigm and to turn a historical character into an archetype (Eliade, 1978). In order to become hero, one must fall into a certain pattern presented by Jack Lule (2001): the future hero should have had a difficult childhood, in a modest family, he or she should be victorious in a confrontation previously initiated, and have a triumphant return. Moreover, the hero leads an exemplary life and becomes a role model for the entire society.

As Jack Lule noticed (2001), sports act as a factory that produces myths in the society since the days of ancient Greece, because they offer drama and conflict, while highlighting the binary opposition: success – failure or victory – defeat. The tales of sports heroes introduce social values and defend social order, offering people a set of guiding values, such as perseverance, sacrifice, fighting spirit and teamwork.

Unlike the classic hero, the modern hero is a media creation, which turns him or her into a celebrity, which is then the subject of marketing and promoting processes. After being offered to consumption for a certain period of time, the hero is discredited and discharged, and his downfall is largely due to the way mass media presents his evolution (Lule, 2001).

Methodology

The research strategy involves using a qualitative content analysis in order to identify the tone of the texts, several keywords and symbols used by media to frame the subject of the analysis into a certain category, as well as the main directions of the media discourse. The analysis is based on a corpus of 12 journalistic texts that have appeared between May 1991, and August 2010, selected from the online edition on the newspaper The New York Times.

This particular newspaper was chosen because it is considered to be the best news organization in the world, being awarded with 108 Pulitzer Prizes (Los Angeles Times, April 17, 2012).

Media discourse analysis

This chapter of the paper is structured into two parts: the first one presents the analysis of Lance Armstrong's media framing as a classic hero, who is a role-model for the society, whereas the second part describes his downfall and his media portrayal as a modern, fallen hero.

Lance Armstrong – the classic portrayal of the hero:

This part of the analysis focuses on identifying the elements that frame Lance Armstrong as a classic hero who leads an exemplary life and is a role model for the society, until his seventh consecutive victory in The Tour of France.

An athlete with an incredible talent and an inspirational life story, Lance Armstrong seems to be the perfect person to become a media – myth. The cyclist fits the pattern presented by Jack Lule (2001) and described above. According to biography.com, Lance comes from a modest family with a lot of issues: his biological father, whom he does not know, had left them when he was two years old, and his relationship with his stepfather is not good at all. Lance's confrontation takes place on two levels: on a personal level and on a sport level. On a personal level, Lance Armstrong had a tough battle against cancer and he came out victorious, although his chances of survival were 40 percent. In terms of sport, he has proven himself by winning seven consecutive Tour of France titles, which were obtained after he won his fight against cancer.

When retiring from cycling, in 2005, Lance Armstrong is presented as a hero with supernatural powers, who defeated cancer, and who then became the most successful Tour of France cyclist, with seven titles. At that time, it seemed that the archaic, traditional myth of the hero can still be found in the modern society, and Lance was portrayed by media as a example of sacrifice, perseverance and fighting spirit.

In 1991, *The New York Times* (May 13, 1991) writes that, even though Lance is just 19 years old, “he is the star of the amateur cycling nation team of the United States of America”. Two years later, after Armstrong's first participation in *The Tour*, the same newspaper considers him a future champion who resembles Miguel Indurain, another cycling hero. In 1996, the athlete is diagnosed with cancer, and, in an article with a suggestive title – “Each day a triumph”, Lance Armstrong is presented as a “hero because he leads the battle against disease – even if he never came close to winning *The Tour of France*, despite having four attempts, he is a star” (*The New York Times*, November 17, 1996). His first tour victory is presented as a miracle: “in the yellow jersey of the champion, Lance Armstrong finished the last step of his long road to Paris, winning the *Tour de France* 33 months after cancer threatened his life and put his career in danger” (*The New York Times*, July 26, 1999).

The traditional, classic myth of the hero myth reappears in American journalistic texts, where Lance Armstrong becomes the new media – hero. As Mircea Eliade (1978) states in the definition of the myth previously presented in this paper, the cyclist appears to be a supernatural being with sacred power; his behavior is a model for the society, and through the performance from *The Tour of France* and the fight against cancer, he overcomes his mere man condition and falls among the heroes that are not part of the ordinary world. In the articles published by *The New York Times*, on July 23, 2002, Lance Armstrong, now at his fourth victory in the *Tour de France*, is portrayed as a person who “responds modestly to victory, credits his U.S. Postal Service colleagues and praises even his strongest competitors”, “in the late 90s, he defeated cancer, he returned to cycling and now he dominates *The Tour*”. His best presentation is the following: “he falls into the category of the so called super champions, of the cyclists who dominate an era” (*The New York Times*, July 23, 2002).

The fifth win of the *Tour of France* places Lance Armstrong among the cycling elite class, along with Miguel Indurain, the only one who had won five consecutive *Tours of France*. The rider is a mythical hero, not only because he is characterized by social values such as perseverance, humility and team spirit, but also due to his role in establishing social order. In an article entitled “Armstrong’s clear example for all people who are struggling with cancer” and published in *The New York Times* on July 27, 2003, the day before his fifth tour victory, media presents his important role in modern society, as well as his contribution to restoring social order: “Armstrong believes that his experience with cancer led to his ascent to the top. He tested his physical and emotional character, the cornerstone of a champion of the *Tour de France*. The question is: can others benefit from his inspiring achievements? In a practical sense, could other people diagnosed with cancer heal as he did? The answer is absolutely yes. Many people do not realize that Armstrong is not the only one who had a strong comeback after suffering from cancer. After cancer diagnosis, surgery and treatment, many people can return to their previous activities and may be even better at what they do (...) He is not only an exceptional athlete with an inspirational story, he is the evidence of something much most important and extraordinary: cancer is not a death sentence (...) Thanks again, Lance”.

After winning the seventh *Tour of France* and announcing his withdrawal, the newspapers write that: “people in sports doubt that will ever appear a cyclist with such athletic talent and such an inspirational life story (...) Lance is not just an epic athlete. He has an epic life story (...) Lance’s influence goes beyond sport. He is a hero for all cancer survivors in the world” (*The New York Times*, July 22, 2005) and “this decade belonged to Armstrong” (*The New York Times*, July 25, 2005).

Lance Armstrong's important role in the society and in restoring social order can be easily seen. He is an inspirational model that gives people the power to overcome illness and return to success in life. The media portrays him as a mythical hero, victorious not only in the battle with the mountains of the *Tour de France*, but also in the fight against cancer. He is a character with extraordinary powers that managed to overcome the human condition and thus he is placed in the

category of those who go above the ordinary, of those who manage to overcome death. Up to this moment, Lance Armstrong, who perfectly fits the classic pattern of the hero, seems to be the living proof that the traditional hero myth could still be found in media. The rider provides to the society an exemplary model, a behavior that everyone should follow.

The return to The Tour of France – the beginning of the hero's downfall

The aim of the second part of the analysis is to identify the role media played in the hero's downfall, which started when Lance Armstrong decided to return to cycling. The focus is on the downfall of the hero and his transformation into a modern hero.

After Lance announced his withdrawal, media starts the process of celebrity transformation. Armstrong's relations with different actresses become more and more present in the news stories, he is now called "the famous Texas playboy" (The New York Times, June 22, 2008). Cancer researchers state that, after leaving cycling, his involvement in the fight against cancer was not significant (The New York Times, June 22, 2008). In the same story published by The New York Times on June 22, 2008, Lance is now just an American celebrity, with a negative portrayal in mass media.

Lance Armstrong is discredited in the media, and articles about him become more frequent in tabloid newspapers. Moreover, the number of news stories accusing him of doping is increasing. Even though he had been previously accused of doping before retiring in 2005, these accusations were rare and easily discharged.

In September 2008, Lance Armstrong announced his return to cycling and to The Tour of France. His motives were conquering the eighth title, removing all doping allegations around him, and promoting the fight against cancer. However, the doping allegations intensified even more. Information about a dispute between Lance and the French Anti-Drug Agency regarding the violation of anti-doping rules start to appear. "If it turns out that the competitor clearly violated the rules, he could be suspended up to two years" (The New York Times, April 9, 2009). In addition, the same newspaper published the following: "in 2005, the French sports newspaper L'Equipe accused him that his samples contained traces of illegal pills, which help to increase performance".

Once transformed from a classic hero into a celebrity, media now begin discredit Lance Armstrong, presenting him as a modern, in decline hero. His return to cycling, a sport where many important competitors have been accused of doping, not only that fails to clean up the image of the sport, but includes him in the list of cheaters, "the star factor created around Armstrong could not save the sport from the damage caused by the issues related to doping. Lance is caught in the middle of his own doping scandal" (The New York Times, January 1, 2010). After Floyd Landis, one of Lance's former teammates, who was previously discovered and suspended two years from cycling, launches several accusations against Lance, the doping suspicions intensify. In an article entitled "Suspicion is a nemesis that Armstrong can not pedal away from", it is clearly stated that the cyclist has no way to escape from all the doping allegations surrounding him (The New York Times, May 20, 2010).

Lance Armstrong's route during the Tour of France 2010 is characterized by The New York Times as one full of falls, bad luck and failures, where he does not even manage to obtain a stage victory: "the last moments of Tuesday's stage of the Tour of France started as the old days when dominating the race, Lance tried to win. He rose from the saddle and sprinted to the finish, exhausting the legs that helped him to win The Tour for seven times. But this time, unlike many other cases in the past, there was no happy ending for Lance, the most successful in the history of The Tour" (The New York Times, July 20, 2010).

Media presents the two Tours of France from 2009 and 2010 as a total failure for Lance. Furthermore, around him more and more accusations of doping appear around him. The media chooses to portray Lance as a modern hero, whose downfall has already begun. I argue the destiny of this rider may be compared to the fate of the mythological Icarus, who, fascinated by heights, flew too

close to the sun, then fell into the sea and died. Similarly, Lance Armstrong, the hero of the Tour de France, wanted more than he has already obtained and failed. Discredited, with the performances questioned by the media, the cyclist becomes a modern Icarus, and the media that instrumented his fall now plays Helios's role.

According to an article published in *The New York Times* (7 August 2010), the aim of modern heroes, which leads to their abrupt fall is "to rise so far above the rest of humanity, that they become unrecognizable - even by themselves" – basically, a modern reinterpretation of the ancient myth of Icarus. The same article summarizes perfectly Lance Armstrong's downfall as a hero – "he is the most complicated of all tainted heroes, and not just because he strongly denied having taken banned substances to improve performance and infringed the rules of sport. Armstrong really was, and remains, a hero to millions (...) he is the one who defeated a cold and implacable enemy – cancer – to achieve extraordinary success that has inspired millions of people with cancer (...) he has four children and is expecting the fifth (...) his story is mythical. However, he is on the verge of danger of being reduced to a mere cheater in sport".

Findings

The analysis reveals the binary opposition success – failure, which characterizes Lance Armstrong's media portrayal as a modern hero. Media frames him as a classic hero, based on the seven titles won in The Tour of France and his achievements until his 2005 retirement. Media presents him as a hero, a role model for the society, who defeated both cancer and Mont Ventoux. After retiring from cycling, media starts the process of discharging the hero and replacing him with a newly created one. Lance's failure after returning to The Tour, his incapability of winning and the doping accusation are the ones that orchestrate his media downfall.

After analyzing the media discourse regarding Lance Armstrong's evolution, several important moments in his life and career were identified: the fight against cancer, the first title in The Tour, the fourth, fifth and seventh titles, the return to cycling and the final retirement. These moments were highly exploited in the creation and destruction of the media-hero created around Lance. The modern myth of the hero follows, in Lance's case, the known evolution of the modern hero: classic hero, celebrity, and fallen hero.

Media played the most important role in Lance Armstrong's downfall. Even though media had the option of presenting his return to cycling as an inspirational model for young sportsmen, media chose to discredit and to replace him. The society and The Tour of France needed a new hero – that was Alberto Contador, the one who was able to defeat the unbeatable Lance. Thus, media's choice was to remove Lance Armstrong from the mythical area of heroes from our society. After a certain period of time, media replaces old heroes with new ones. Media produces new mythic creations, with a fate similar to the one of the predecessors. Modern societies are in constant need of heroes and thus media can be regarded as a myths' recycling instrument. Heroes are created following a certain pattern, are shared with the society, are discredited and finally replaced.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed Lance Armstrong's media framing as a modern hero created by The Tour of France. After winning seven consecutive titles in the tour, he returns to cycling, but fails to maintain the aura of a supernatural character created around him. Lance Armstrong's failure reveals his human nature, the fact that, in the end, no matter how much he tried, he was not able to overcome his human condition. Media instruments Lance's downfall and presents him as a fallen hero, a modern Icarus of this sport.

The findings presented in this paper reinforce the perspective that media creations have a mythic status. The function of mass media in modern societies is similar to the function of the institutions that produced myths in ancient societies. The myth of the hero is a worldwide spread

archetype, based on the values and ideals of each society. People are in a constant need of having heroes among them, and media plays an important role in satisfying this. Media creates heroic myths according to a pattern; shares them, in order to discharge and replace them after a certain period of time.

Based on the results presented in this paper, a future work could analyze how a powerful total myth, such as The Tour of France, could lead to the creation of new myths. A question that could be addressed in a future is whether The Tour of France, with the help of media, acts as a myth creation laboratory, and what other total myths could be discovered in modern societies. Furthermore, after a certain period of time, media replaces old heroes with new ones.

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