

XII ● POPULAR CULTURE

36 ● Media and Folklore as Intertextual Communication Processes: John F. Kennedy and the Supermarket Tabloids

S. ELIZABETH BIRD

University of Iowa

FOLKLORE, the orally transmitted traditions of any given group of people, has rarely been considered by communications scholars, remaining the province of anthropologists and specialized folklorists. Yet the transmission and maintenance of folk traditions are clearly complex communication processes that are important in constituting the worldview of any culture. According to Bascom (1954), in a classic statement on the functions of folklore, folklore serves to educate, to validate culture, to maintain conformity, and to serve as an outlet for wish fulfillment.

Through folklore, such as tales, jokes, legends, and rumor, a culture reaffirms its values and offers answers to perplexing questions. Rodgers (1985), one of the few communications scholars to look closely at folklore as communication, offers an explanation for the importance of "urban legends"—the usually apochryphal tales that circulate orally about phantom hitchhikers, cats in microwaves, celebrities in unusual situations, and so on. Drawing on the work of Brunvand (1981) and others, Rodgers explains the importance of such legends in constituting and reconstituting a culture's worldview, a worldview that often appears unscientific, distrustful of government and technology, and reliant on stereotypical views of gender and different ethnic groups. Brunvand's study of urban legends points out that

Correspondence and requests for reprints: S. Elizabeth Bird, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242.

758

although the tales are told as entertainment, they depend on a degree of plausibility and authentication, confirming and revitalizing existing fears and stereotypes by articulating these in narrative form. The legends will continue to circulate in different, ever changing variants as long as there is a reason to tell them. Almost all make some overt or implicit point; a lesson is learned in the telling.

Rodgers argues for the importance of analyzing oral tradition as popular communication, pointing out that folklore is a thriving process in contemporary, urban communities. For although communications scholars would no doubt accept the important role of folklore in constituting culture in less technologically based societies (see, for example, Basso, 1984), many neglect this same process in contemporary society. It is left to folklorists such as Dundes (1982) to point out that "the folk" are urban Americans as well as rural peasants.

Rodgers's work is unusual in bringing folklore into the realm of communication study. In general there has been virtually no contact between folklorists, with their emphasis on oral transmission, and media scholars, with their emphasis on mediated transmission. Increasingly, folklorists are having to look at media, but the approach is usually to identify folkloric motifs that appear in the media—folklore in literature, folklore in television, and so on. Several researchers, such as Brunvand (1981) and Hobbs (1978), have shown how newspapers sometimes pass on urban legends, but the idea seems to be that this is somehow accidental, that newspapers are primarily concerned with "facts," but sometimes they get duped.

Thus Degh and Vazsonyi point out, "there is no doubt that media draws heavily on folklore and vice versa," (1973, p. 36), but they go on to distinguish between "genuine folk tradition" and the media contribution to it. Even those folklorists who study urban cultures will often ignore the fact that these contemporary "folk" are surrounded by messages from many sources other than face-to-face contact. For the sake of disciplinary convenience they continue to separate genres and sources in a way that misrepresents the actual cultural context.

Meanwhile, media researchers have viewed newspapers and other media as active transmitters that act upon passive consumers, in a one-way transmission process. The result has been a tradition in American media research that emphasizes effect rather than process, and the discovery of the uniqueness of media messages rather than their cultural context (Kepplinger, 1979). With both disciplines defending the uniqueness of oral versus media communication processes, there has been little opportunity for dialogue. Donald Allport Bird (1976) was one of the first to question this state of affairs, challenging folklorists to take a broader view of media:

Folklore and mass communications share common frameworks of defined situations, structure, function, and tradition. Communication—whether folk-

loric or mass—frequently takes place through media and contains verbal and non-verbal expressive forms and common symbols that are often ritualistic and ceremonial. Mass communication in itself is a social, cultural phenomenon worthy of study by the folklorist. (pp. 285-286)

The crucial point here is the assertion that mass communication in itself is worthy of study—not just the way folkloric themes sometimes filter into the media, but the process of the media message itself, taking into account the interaction of the consumer in receiving and interpreting the message.

This study attempts to draw together some of the approaches of folklore and media research to show that oral transmission and media transmission may not be as distinct in kind as the interdisciplinary barriers would suggest. The case study chosen is an analysis of the "image" of President John F. Kennedy in "supermarket tabloid" newspapers. This shows how that image draws on orally transmitted "legends," but also how media accounts themselves work like urban legends in restructuring diffuse beliefs, uncertainties, and stereotypes in narrative form. The image of Kennedy can be seen to derive from many sources, oral and mediated; to divide these up into entirely different processes, worthy of study by entirely different specialists, is artificial and unproductive. People construct a view of reality from all the culturally embedded messages they encounter, whether these are oral, written, or electronic. Furthermore, the media themselves, as part of culture, develop their themes and tell their stories in ways that are not unlike the process of oral transmission.

KENNEDY AND THE TABLOIDS

Several folklorists have pointed out the way supermarket tabloids, such as the *National Enquirer*, *Star*, *Globe*, *National Examiner*, and others have picked up folkloristic stories, including Kennedy legends. Blaustein (undated) has looked in a more general sense at the way the *National Enquirer* restates the folk theme of "rags-to-riches" by constantly retelling it through specific stories. His approach is, I believe, more fruitful than simply pointing out appearances of clearly identifiable urban legends in print. Rather, we look for some kind of cumulative themes that emerge from the papers over time.

These themes are clear, and have been listed by a writer who has made a living in the tabloids market (Holden, 1979). They include celebrity gossip, rags-to-riches stories, self-improvement through diet and exercise (often with an almost magical component), and the handicapped overcoming terrible odds. A special category includes what have variously been called "Gee whiz" or "Hey Martha" stories—the kind that make people look up and say,

"Hey Martha, did you know that . . ." These are the quintessential tabloid stories (McDonald, 1984).

Kennedy's role as tabloid hero began to emerge only after his death. Tabloids generally ignore politics and politicians, and it was his developing status as a popular hero rather than as a president as such that turned him into a tabloid staple. The growth of that status was rapid, and dependent on the assassination. Just before the 1960 New Hampshire primary, the *National Enquirer* (in a brief, soon-to-be dropped "political" column) reported that Kennedy's biggest drawback as a presidential candidate was "the vagueness of his popularity with the voters" (*National Enquirer*, 1960, p. 15), and in April of that year it commented: "He fears that his youthful appearance will cost him a good deal of support" (1960, p. 10). As Edwards writes, "Kennedy was not elected by image; he was chiefly elected because the suspicions of him were outweighed by the suspicions of Nixon" (1984, p. 410). Even the assassination itself was ignored in 1963 by the *National Enquirer*, which presumably was not anticipating the growth of a "legend." However, not long after Kennedy's death, and especially following doubts raised by the Warren Commission findings, the "legend" was under way:

Suddenly, the dead Kennedy became what he had been for relatively few in life—the hope for the future, the promise of advancement for the underdog, the notion of grace and magic, the hero, the Prince of youth . . . it was also the age-old horror of the slaying of the priest-king, which Kennedy had not been until he fell. (Edwards, 1984, p. 413)

By 1983, the 20th anniversary of the assassination, Kennedy's status was well established, both in the tabloids and elsewhere. Analysis of tabloid texts from several papers in 1983 and 1984 reveals some clear themes.¹ Perhaps the most striking, and certainly the most paralleled in identifiable oral legends, is the "Kennedy-is-alive" story.

This legend is still circulating orally, and was first documented in the folklore literature in the late 1960s. De Caro and Oring (1969) detail tales collected from oral tradition that describe Kennedy as alive in a "vegetable-like state" in Athens, Greece, and the marriage of Jacqueline Kennedy to Aristotle Onassis as a carefully arranged fake, with sources often offering psychic Jean Dixon as authority for the story. Rosenberg (1976) gives oral variants in which Kennedy is in Parkland Hospital in Dallas or at Camp David.

Rosenberg also discusses the circulation of the story, attributed to Truman Capote, in the *Milwaukee Metro-News* and the *National Informer*, a now-defunct Chicago-based tabloid, again including an explanation for Jacqueline Kennedy's marriage. Baker (1976) offers a variant reported in the *National Tattler* in 1971—Kennedy on a Greek island owned by Onassis. His widow is supposed to have married Onassis only so she can visit

the island without suspicion. The story also appeared in a Montreal-based tabloid (*Midnight*, Oct. 18, 1969, pp. 14-15). According to a former staff member of that publication, the story, which included photographs, was elaborately fabricated and staged in light of the widely known legends circulating orally at the time.²

The most recent printed version appeared in the *National Examiner* (July 26, 1983, p. 23). In this variant, Kennedy is being kept closely guarded at a retreat in the Swiss Alps. He has regained some of his mental functions, and on good days he has the abilities of an 11-year-old. The story is reminiscent both of urban legends and of mainstream news accounts in its attention to detail and insistence on attribution to reliable sources. In this case the authority is a Swedish psychic, Sven Petersen, "who contributes to para-psychology newsletters around the world and is especially respected for his experiments in communication with the dead." Throughout the story his expertise is stressed: "a reputation as one of the world's most skilled mediums," "a considerable reputation for accuracy and veracity." The story also quotes a Dr. Chandra Singh, "a political scientist at the University of Calcutta," who maintains that these circumstances would explain the many discrepancies in accounts of what happened to Kennedy after the shooting. In this version, it is pointed out that Jacqueline Kennedy was not party to the secret, a point that indicates the way she has been gradually cut out of the picture over the years as the image of J.F.K. himself has assumed prominence.

The story, of course, rests on the assumption that *National Examiner* readers have a great deal of faith in psychics, an assumption that pervades all tabloid narratives and that also underlies other stories that have developed the "Kennedy-is-alive" theme. In these cases, Kennedy has been reincarnated, first in the form of a 7-year-old German boy (*Sun*, July 3, 1984). "Psychics have confirmed that they can communicate with the spirit of J.F.K. through Klaus Zimmerman," the account claims, adding that a U.S. government official "shook his head in amazement" when he interviewed the boy. Again, the details: "He even recalls a 1962 conversation between little Caroline Kennedy and the ambassador of Niger." Psychics quoted in the account predict that Klaus will grow up to be a great leader who will reunite East and West Berlin—echoes of "Ich bin ein Berliner," perhaps.

A month later, a 10-year-old Indian girl is "hailed by scientists and religious leaders as incredible proof of reincarnation" (*National Examiner*, Aug. 4, 1984). Dr. Chandra Murakajee, "a world-respected parapsychologist and professor of antiquities," is quoted as saying, "there is little doubt that Sharda lived before as President Kennedy." Like Klaus, she suffers headaches that are her recollections of the assassination.

As Rosenberg (1976) points out, the notions of a dead mythic hero (or villain) being alive and ready to return, or returning in the form of another

person, are widespread heroic motifs. Tied closely to the idea of Kennedy's return is the theme of a conspiracy that killed him: Perhaps he is dead, but it took almost superhuman powers to kill him, a motif also discussed by Rosenberg (1976). This old motif was probably fueled further by the genuine controversy over the Warren Commission's conclusions, and the uncertainties surrounding responsibility for the murder. Ambiguity and unsatisfactorily explained circumstances traditionally provide fertile ground for the growth of legend and rumor (Mullen, 1972).

Thus the *Globe* (Nov. 29, 1983, p. 7) reports that "he died because a Buddhist curse guided three independent assassination teams to Dallas on that fateful day, claim two top psychics and a veteran investigator." The curse was invoked in November, 1963, by a group of Buddhist monks who blamed J.F.K. for the assassination of the president of Vietnam and his brother. The curse set in motion all three forces opposing Kennedy—the Guardians, a clandestine group of international arch-conservatives, some C.I.A. elements who said he was a threat to national security, and the Mafia, whose feud with the Kennedys dated back to the 1920s. Kennedy apparently knew he was doomed, but like Jesus and other heroes, "he calmly accepted that, and played the role fate had assigned him." The narrative effect sought here, as throughout the tabloid treatment of Kennedy, has been described by Herstein Smith (1981, p. 225) as "resonance." The story is intended to evoke in the reader a complex of responses and emotions associated with the cultural heritage of "doomed hero" conventions.

The *National Enquirer*, in a special issue commemorating the assassination (Nov. 22, 1983), throws a new group into the conspiracy. "Working with top experts on the assassination" (p. 30), it identifies the assassins as French terrorists who apparently hated J.F.K. because of his speeches supporting Algerian independence. The *Enquirer's* cover photograph for its special issue was clearly chosen for its resonant qualities, showing Kennedy kneeling, hands folded in prayer, eyes gazing heavenward. In the same issue, the *Enquirer* develops the mystique supposedly surrounding the assassination with "a long list of people associated with the J.F.K. slaying who have died mysteriously and often violently since then" (p. 35).

As a kind of subplot, the "Kennedy curse" continues to haunt the family, and is cited as a major factor in such tragedies as the death of David Kennedy (*National Enquirer*, May 15, 1984, pp. 30-35; *National Examiner*, May 15, 1984, p. 11; *Star*, May 15, 1984, pp. 16-17). A strange echo of the living Kennedy theme appears in a *National Examiner* story that asks, "Was David Kennedy buried alive?" (Nov. 20, 1984, p. 27).

A final main theme is the prowess of Kennedy with women, an aspect that has grown to heroic proportions since his death. News of Kennedy's womanizing was suppressed by the media during his life (Gans, 1980, p. 484) and many mainstream media have continued to play it down, preferring to present Kennedy as a more sanitized hero. In the popular world-

view, however, Kennedy's sexuality has become a major part of the legend, and even in more mainstream media this aspect of Kennedy's image has come more to the fore, in spite of the scruples of "responsible" writers:

We've heard all this before in the *National Enquirer* and elsewhere, but it says something about our culture that it can appear as well in a biography whose title declares it celebratory. This, then, is yet another of the roles Kennedy played: Don Juan. Accompanied by winks, it too has become part of the myth-verification that the hero of World War II and the Cuban missile crisis was, in the same macho terms, heroic in bed as well. (Hochschild, 1984, p. 56)

For, as Owen Jones writes, "A hero is a man whose deeds epitomize the masculine attributes most highly valued within a society" (1971, p. 341), and prowess with women is certainly one of these. The tabloids are tireless in their listing of the women Kennedy supposedly seduced, including Judy Garland, Veronica Lake, Angie Dickinson, and Gene Tierney. The various affairs described provide not only a vivid picture of the "heroic" male role ascribed to Kennedy but also of conventional images of female sexuality, from helpless innocent, through insatiable slut, to untouchable princess. Most of the affairs share a feature that raises Kennedy's prowess to a mystical level; the women involved could not help themselves, but fell completely under his spell, although he remained always in control. They were conquests to him, but he was the love of their lives.

Thus Veronica Lake "would have given up Hollywood in a flash for the chance to be his bride," and Gene Tierney "succumbed to J.F.K.'s charm and fell very much in love" (*Globe*, Nov. 29, 1983, p. 4). Marielle Novotny was said to be an 18-year-old Soviet spy who was ordered to seduce Kennedy and obtain state secrets. "But the Russian scheme backfired when Novotny succumbed to J.F.K.'s charms and fell madly in love with him." According to her husband, "J.F.K. was her first and probably her only true love" (*Globe*, Nov. 29, 1983, p. 4). Florinda Bolkan, a Brazilian actress, was said to be Kennedy's last lover. "He was handsome, young, rich, intelligent, and at the height of his power. He could have had any woman he wanted" (*Globe*, Dec., 1983). Bolkan is quoted: "We were so close in that short time before his death that I believe he has watched over me ever since. There was something strange, almost supernatural, in our meeting. . . . He was my first love, and my last."

Rather different is the treatment given to Kennedy's reported relationship with Marilyn Monroe, herself a perennial tabloid favorite. According to the *National Examiner*, Monroe had sexual relations with both John and Robert Kennedy, and was pregnant by Robert when she died (*National Examiner*, July 3, 1984, p. 1; Oct. 23, 1984, p. 35). She was also used by the Soviet Union, who extracted "pillow talk" secrets from her through a

spy who became her lover and eventually murdered her. She is portrayed as a woman who had numerous lovers, most of whom used her. It is almost the mirror image of the portrayal of Kennedy, and is a clear example of the "double standard" at work.

One woman, however, was apparently special—the woman who in the tabloids has become a mythic princess comparable to Kennedy's prince, and who seems to represent the other side of Monroe's sad nymphomaniac. Both the *National Examiner* and the *Globe* report on the secret romance between J.F.K. and Princess Grace of Monaco. Like all women, "Grace fell almost immediately under the sway of the president" (*Globe*, Nov. 29, 1983, p. 7). In recurring verbal formulae, Kennedy is compared to Prince Rainier: "Kennedy at the height of his power and glamor, was almost embarrassingly superior in every way to the paunchy Prince of a tiny country devoted to gambling and vacations." According to the *Examiner*, "he was at the height of his power—the most powerful man in the world and one who had brought a message of hope and peace for all" (Sept. 13, 1983).

According to the *Globe*, Kennedy traveled secretly to Nice to meet Grace seven times, although there was some question as to whether the relationship was sexual. The *Examiner* is more specific: "Grace, of course, was too principled ever to launch into an affair with Kennedy, but who's to say if her heart was ever her own, or Rainier's, after this momentous meeting" (Sept. 13, 1983). On Kennedy's part, "who could blame him if for an instant, it crossed his mind that she would have been the perfect wife to reign with him in Camelot" (Sept. 13, 1983).

Kennedy's actual wife, Jacqueline, seems to have almost disappeared from the tabloids, apart from occasional appearances in gossip round-ups and as peripheral to stories about the other Kennedys. One rather odd exception is a story describing how J.F.K. installed listening devices (bugs) in his wife's brassieres so that he could hear her conversations with aides (*National Examiner*, Sept. 4, 1984, p. 1). Kennedy's total control over women, including his own wife, seems to reach an absurd level in this account.

IMPLICATIONS

From this brief summary of tabloid stories, we have a picture of Kennedy as a mythic hero, potent both politically and sexually. He can only die as a result of treachery and in the face of exceptional odds, and his charisma transcends death itself.

An important question that arises is whether or not the tabloid media create an image and then foist it upon their readership, as mass media effects research would tend to suggest, or, conversely, whether or not tab-

loids merely passively reflect the image of the world already held by their readers. The answer is, I believe, more complex than such simplistic models would suggest.

The image of Kennedy that emerges from the tabloids is not unique to them, but includes elements that appear both in oral tradition and in other mass media (see, for example, Epstein, 1975). In addition, specific stories about Kennedy are often resonant with association that goes beyond him as an individual. Rather than plucking the stories out of thin air, it appears that the tabloids pick up on their readers' (and others') existing ideas and beliefs, restating them in narrative form, performing much the same function as the teller of an urban legend. It is likely that some readers will then pass them on orally through conversation and gossip. This is not to say that reading a tabloid is identical to hearing an oral legend, but if with Hemstein Smith we agree that narrative of all kinds is a "social transaction" (1981, p. 228) involving frames of reference shared by teller and audience, we may see them as comparable processes.

Even more than newspapers, tabloids place much emphasis on reader response and involvement. The *National Enquirer* alone receives over one million letters a year, and uses them to gauge audience interest. *Enquirer* publisher Generoso Pope has said that every story he runs must interest more than 50% of his readers (McDonald, 1984), although he does not explain how this is determined. It seems unlikely that the tabloids themselves have to create a belief in reincarnation, psychics, and the like—only to rearticulate it. The readers then pass on these beliefs, probably not in the form of detailed urban legends, but in gossip and rumor. As Rosnow and Fine (1976) have pointed out, the media often act as brokers of such rumor, the audience and media existing in a symbiotic relationship.

Like traditional storytellers, journalists often work by taking general themes and structuring them into a coherent narrative, using established formulae. Like the purely oral storytellers described by Lord (1971) in his classic analysis of formulaic oral composition, journalists have to work quickly and efficiently, slotting new information into frameworks that are clearly understood by both teller and audience. These constructed narratives then fragment back into oral tradition, only to be restructured by another storyteller later, in a continuing, cyclical process.

The effect of themes that recur over and over again in a slightly different form is noted by Lord:

This common stock of formulas gives the traditional songs a homogeneity which strikes the listener or reader as soon as he has heard or read more than one song, and creates the impression that all singers know all the same formulas. (Lord, 1971, p. 49)

News is often similar. Graber (1984) observes that "most stories are simply minor updates of previous news or new examples of old themes" (p. 61), and Rock (1981) comments:

The content may change, but the forms will be enduring. Much news is, in fact, ritual. It conveys an impression of endlessly repeated drama whose themes are familiar and well-understood. (p. 68)

Folkloric communication and mass communication are, therefore, not the entirely different processes that both folklorists and mass communications researchers have implied. Tabloid journalism is a particular type of highly stylized communication that tends to represent the worldview of certain parts of the population, a worldview that may rest on attribution to psychics and celebrities as well as to the more conventional "authorities." However, all journalism is the construction of reality, and as process it belongs on the same continuum with oral tradition. Journalism, particularly of the "human interest" kind, is by nature storytelling, a fact that has only recently been fully recognized in the communications literature. From this view, journalism is not merely the objective reporting of facts, but the construction of narratives that conform to the expectations of reader and writer (Barkin, 1984; Bird & Dardenne, 1986; Eason, 1981).

Cohen (1973) observed the interrelationship between oral and print communication when analyzing 19th-century ballad and newspaper stories of a murder, both of which "distorted facts to accommodate a shared pattern of storytelling" (p. 4). Her assumption was that "these formulae are shared also by large numbers of the reading and listening public who accept and preserve these narratives" (pp. 4-5).

Darnton (1975) argues that this relationship is also a contemporary one. Storytelling codes provide techniques that still guide the construction of many news stories, involving the "manipulation of standardized images, clichés, angles, slants, and scenarios, which will call forth a conventional response in the minds of editors and readers" (p. 189). Recalling his experience as a *New York Times* reporter, he describes the way journalists could obtain quotes for particular, standard stories:

When I needed such quotes I used to make them up, as did some of the others . . . for we knew what the bereaved mother and the mourning father should have said, and possibly even heard them speak what was in our minds rather than in theirs. (p. 190)

This being said, it should also be stressed that writing or reading newspapers is not the same as telling or listening to a story. The news is obviously mediated not only through the journalist, but also through the institutional structures of the newspaper and of society at large. Thus Hall (1975) acknowledges the social transaction between newspapers and readers, commenting "successful communication in this field depends to some degree on a process of mutual confirmation between those who produce and those who consume" (p. 22). He cautions, however, that "at the same time, the producers hold a powerful position vis-à-vis their audiences"

(p. 22) and thus will tend to set the agenda. As Nord (1980) points out, formulaic popular genres are a product not only (or primarily in his view) of mutually understood frameworks. They are also a product of economic forces that make formulaic potboilers easy and profitable to turn out.

Nevertheless, a purely economic view begs the question of where the formulae came from in the first place, and the answer, reinforced by the evidence of folklore and popular culture, is that they are not imposed from above. Slater (1982), in one of the few specific studies that compares media and folkloric communication, argues that media framings are in large part determined by an awareness on the part of journalists of existing folk schemata. She quotes a writer of the popular "literatura de cordel" in Brazil, which has some clear similarities to tabloids:

It does no good to write about a child who was born with two heads if there is not already a rumor to the effect, if people are not already talking about it in the streets. (p. 53)

Similarly, tabloid writers tend to write stories that pick up on tales and images of Kennedy that already exist, in turn helping to keep these alive and circulating.

Young (1981), although agreeing that both economic considerations and maintenance of a dominant ideology are fundamental to the functioning of modern mass media, argues that particularly those media that must sell to working-class audiences must to a great extent represent the culture of their audiences. As Carey (1975) writes, news may be seen not so much as information-giving, but as ritual or play, as social values are defined and celebrated through the telling of stories that lay out cultural codes. Indeed, Bascom's (1954) functions of folklore (mentioned above) could just as accurately be applied to news. The power of media's "ideological effect" as discussed by Hall (1977) and others derives not from coercion and forcing audiences to consume a product they dislike, but from using familiar narrative structures to frame stories in ways that reinforce hegemony.

According to Caweltt's discussion of "artistic matrices," face-to-face oral transmission might belong to the "communal matrix," in which "there is a lack of distance between its elements and the absence of mediating figures within the system" (1978, p. 296). Closely related to this is the "mythological matrix" that "resembles the communal model in that there is a high degree of identification between creator-performer and audience, and the genres are a communal possession rather than individual creations" (p. 298). Through this matrix, a culture's values and beliefs are dramatized in such media as news and other popular culture, but with the "myth-maker" retaining control over the product. A dialectical relationship exists between symbolic systems and society so that, as Geertz (1973) notes, these symbolic systems are both a model of and a model for society, both

reflecting and re-presenting value systems. It is here that media such as tabloids are situated, as they pick up existing folk ideas, re-presenting them as story, and helping to reinforce and reshape the folk worldview.

The folk worldview of tabloid readers is not always shared by the culture as a whole. In fact, tabloids may be an example of what Young (1981) calls "the accommodative culture" of the working class, a culture that, although accommodated within the dominant ideology, may be at odds with that ideology:

This is evident, for example, in the language of newspapers directed to the working class involving the distinctly non-bourgeois world of fate, luck, inequality and cynicism. (p. 41)

Tabloids, with their emphasis on the unexplained and the mystical, as reflected in many aspects of the Kennedy myth, represent aspects of the folk worldview of their targeted audiences, just as mainstream newspapers, with their emphasis on official sources, scientific explanation and so on, represent the folk worldview of theirs (with a considerable overlap between the two, of course). Although much of the mystical view did permeate the "quality" press and other media, it dominated the tabloids, which dealt exclusively in his personality and charisma, responding to their primarily working-class readers (Perpich and Lehnert, 1984). We see clearly the "paradox of charisma," as Geertz (1983) has termed it.

[Although] charisma is rooted in the sense of being near to the heart of things . . . a sentiment that is felt most characteristically and continuously by those who in fact dominate social affairs. . . . its most flamboyant expressions tend to appear among people at some distance from the center, indeed often enough at a rather enormous distance, who want to be closer. (pp. 143-144)

Of course, there is no neat cause-and-effect relationship such that only people who read "quality" papers hold "nonmystical" images of Kennedy, or that only tabloid readers have heard that Kennedy is alive. Most people are exposed to information from myriad sources. The point is simply that in a world where mass media and oral transmission go hand-in-hand, people's perceptions derive from communication processes of all kinds. As Blaustein (undated) points out:

The folklorist is essentially a student of human communication. In contemporary American society, the folklorist must take account of the bewilderingly complex mesh of communication channels through which our culture is generated, transmitted and perpetuated. (p. 2)

Distinctions between communication channels and genres, important as they may be to folklorists and communication scholars, are not as relevant to the "folk" in constructing a particular view of the world. Smith (1984) argues that generic distinctions between, for example, legend and rumor may be counterproductive; his argument may be extended profitably to mass communication channels:

Irrespective of whether, as folklorists, we wish to draw the line and say this is legend and this rumour, to everyone else in the world that line does not exist. Instead the narrative content is simply information which can be derived from a variety of sources each using different forms of communication. . . . We cannot afford to use the easy option of avoiding forms of contemporary legends which occur in what we define as non-traditional modes. (pp. 212-213)

Johnson (1983) echoes this argument in his discussion of the interdisciplinary, intermedia approach of cultural studies:

Texts are encountered promiscuously; they pour in on us from all directions in diverse, coexisting media, and differently paced flows. In everyday life, textual materials are complex, multiple, overlapping, co-existent, juxtaposed, in a word, 'inter-textual' (p. 41)

Journalism and folklore are not only related on the occasions when newspapers report an "urban legend" as fact. Media, particularly such media as tabloids, are not merely good sources of folklore. Rather, media and oral tradition are comparable, though not identical, communication processes, during which narratives are constructed from familiar themes that repeat themselves over time. People do not necessarily transmit folklore and attend to media in different ways and for different purposes—both are part of the complex way in which cultural "reality" is constructed. The "truth" about John F. Kennedy differs among people, but whatever that perceived truth or image might be, it is a dynamic one that is fed by communication processes of all kinds, oral and mass-mediated among them.

NOTES

1. The texts studied appeared in several weekly tabloids from July, 1983, through 1984. Some stories were obtained in the form of photocopies from publishers' offices; in these cases, page references are unavailable.
2. Interview with Mary Peipich, former staff writer for *Midnight*, Aug. 6, 1985, Memphis, TN.

REFERENCES

Baker, R. L. (1976). The influence of mass culture on modern legends. *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 40, 367-376.

- Barkin, S. M. (1984). The journalist as storyteller: An interdisciplinary perspective. *American Journalism*, 1(2), 27-33.
- Bascoun, W. R. (1954). Four functions of folklore. *Journal of American Folklore*, 67, 333-349.
- Basso, K. H. (1984). Stalking with stories: Names, places, and moral narratives among the Apache. In E. M. Bruner (Ed.), *Text, play and story: The construction and reconstruction of self and society* (pp. 19-55). WA: American Ethnological Society, 19-55.
- Bird, D. A. (1976). A theory for folklore in mass media: Traditional patterns in the mass media. *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 40, 285-305.
- Bird, S. E., & Dardenne, R. W. (1986). *Myth, chronicle, and story: Exploring the narrative qualities of news*. Revised, unpublished version of paper presented in Qualitative Studies Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Memphis, TN, 1985.
- Blaustein, R. (Unpublished). *Horatio Alger is alive and well: The rags to riches syndrome and the reaffirmation of belief in the National Enquirer*. Unpublished manuscript, Indiana University, Indiana folklore Archive.
- Brunvand, J. H. (1981). *The vanishing hitchhiker*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Carey, J. (1975). A cultural approach to communication. *Communication*, 2, 1-22.
- Caweltt, J. G. (1978). The concept of artistic matrices. *Communication Research*, 5(3), 283-305.
- Cohen, A. (1973). *Poor Pearl, poor girl: The murdered girl stereotype in ballad and newspaper*. Austin, TX: Publications of the American Folklore Society Memoir Series, 58.
- Darnton, R. (1975). Writing news and telling stories. *Daedalus*, 104(2), 175-194.
- De Caro, F. A., & Oring, E. (1969). J.F.K. is alive: A modern legend. *Folklore Forum*, 2(2), 54-55.
- Degh, L., & Vazsonyi, A. (1973). The dialectics of legend. Bloomington: Indiana University Folklore Preprint Series 1(6).
- Dundes, A. (1982). *Interpreting folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Eason, D. L. (1981). Telling stories and making sense. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15(2), 125-129.
- Edwards, O. D. (1984). Remembering the Kennedys. *Journal of American Studies*, 18(3), 405-423.
- Epstein, E. J. (1975). *History as fiction. In between fact and fiction: The problem of journalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gans, H. J. (1980). *Deciding what's news: a study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1983). Centers, kings, and charisma: Symbolics of power. In *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Globe (1983, Nov. 29). Series of stories on John F. Kennedy, 4-7.
- Globe (1983, December). I was J.F.K.'s last lover, page unknown.
- Grabber, D. A. (1984). *Processing the news: How people tame the information tide*. New York: Longman.
- Hall, S. (1975). Introduction. In A. C. H. Smith, *Paper voices: The popular press and social change 1935-1965*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Hall, S. (1977). Culture, the media and the ideological effect. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, & J. Woolacott (Eds.), *Mass communication and society* (pp. 315-348). London: Edward Arnold.
- Hernstein Smith, B. (1981). Narrative versions, narrative theories. In W. J. T. Mitchell (Ed.), *On narrative*, (pp. 209-232). Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Hobbs, S. (1978). The folktale as news. *Oral History*, 6(2), 74-86.
- Hochschild, A. (1984, February-March). Would J.F.K. be a hero now? *Mother Jones*, 56-57.
- Holden, L. (1979, July). The incredibly rich tabloid market. *Writers Digest*, 19-22.
- Johnson, R. (1983). *What is cultural studies anyway?* Birmingham University, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies General Series SP 74.
- Keppinger, H. M. (1979). Paradigm change in communication research. *Communication*, 4(2), 160-171.

- Loyd, A. B. (1971). *The singer of tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McDonald, D. M. (1984). *Supermarket tabloids*. Paper presented at 14th Annual Convention of the Popular Culture Association, Toronto, Canada.
- Midnight (1969, October 18). Photos show JFK alive on Skorprios, 14: 15.
- Mullen, P. B. (1972). Modern legend and rumor theory. *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 9, 95-109.
- National Enquirer. (1960, Jan. 15). Political Notebook, 15. (1960, April 3). Political Notebook, 10.
- (1983, Nov. 22). Special Section on John F. Kennedy, 30-35.
- (1984, May 15). Special Section on David Kennedy, 30-35.
- National Examiner. (1983, July 23). J. F. K. is alive!, 23.
- (1983, Sept. 13). Grace and J.F.K.'s love secrets, page unknown.
- (1984, May 15). Kennedy curse: who's next?, 11.
- (1984, July 3). Marilyn was pregnant with Kennedy baby, 1.
- (1984, Aug. 7). I lived before as J.F.K., page unknown.
- (1984, Sept. 4). J.F.K. bugged Jackie's bra, 1.
- (1984, Oct. 23). Marilyn Monroe seduced J.F.K. and Bobby for reals, 35.
- (1984, Nov. 20). Was David Kennedy buried alive?, 27.
- Nord, D. P. (1980). An economic perspective on formula in popular culture. *Journal of American Culture*, 3, 17-31.
- Owen Jones, M. (1971). (PC + CB) x SD (R + I + E) = Hero. *New York Folklore Quarterly*, 27, 243-260.
- Pepich, M. J., & Lehnert, E. (1984). *An attitude segmentation study of supermarket tabloid readers*. Paper presented at 14th Annual Convention of the Popular Culture Association, Toronto, Canada.
- Rodgers, R. S. (1985). *Popular legend and urban folklore as popular communication*. Paper presented in Popular Communication Interest Group, Annual Convention of International Communication Association, Honolulu, HI.
- Rock, P. (1981). News as eternal recurrence. In S. Cohen & J. Young (Eds.), *The manufacture of news: Social problems, deviance and the mass media* (pp. 64-70). London: Constable.
- Rosenberg, B. A. (1976). Kennedy in Camelot: The Arthurian legend in America. *Western Folklore*, 25(1), 52-59.
- Rosnow, R. L., & Fine, G. A. (1976). *Rumor and gossip: The social psychology of hearsay*. New York: Elsevier.
- Slater, C. (1982). The hairy leg strikes: The individual artist and the Brazilian literatura de cordel. *Journal of American Folklore*, 95, 51-89.
- Smith, P. (1982). *On the receiving end: When legend becomes rumour*. Paper presented at the Perspectives on Contemporary Legend Conference, Sheffield, England.
- Star (1984, May 15). Guilt-ridden David Kennedy's anguish, 16-17.
- Sun (1984, July 3). Boy, 7, is reincarnation of J.F.K., page unknown.
- Young, J. (1981). Beyond the consensual paradigm: a critique of left functionalism in media theory. In S. Cohen & J. Young (Eds.), *The manufacture of news: Social problems, deviance and the mass media* (pp. 393-421). London: Constable.

37 ● Behaving Oneself: The Place of Manners in Contemporary American Culture

KARI WHITTENBERGER-KEITH

the University of Texas at Austin

MANNERS are a big business in contemporary American society ("Minding our manners again," 1984). Manners camps and classes are popular for children and adults alike. Books about manners, ranging from the proper wedding etiquette to manners in the office, are at the top of the bestsellers lists. Popular magazines count columns on manners among their most popular features. Americans generally seem to be much more concerned about social behavior than they have been in the recent past.

The leader of the 1980s manners movement would have to be Judith Martin, former dance and theater critic for the *Washington Post*. Writing under the pseudonym of Miss Manners, Martin has made manners, and general concern with social behavior, popular again. Her "Miss Manners" column started in 1978, after she convinced a dubious editorial board at the *Post* that a manners column could be popular. Her success has gone beyond anyone's wildest dreams. The column, first syndicated to only 3 newspapers, is now featured in almost 200 newspapers nationwide. Martin receives over 10,000 letters a year in response to the column, from readers of all ages, posing various questions about manners. Her first book, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior* (1982), was on the bestseller lists for several months, and her second book, *Miss Manners' Guide to Rearing Perfect Children* (1984), has been issued in a first printing of 200,000 copies. Obviously, manners, especially in the form of Miss Manners, sells.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author wishes to extend grateful thanks to William Keith, David Payne, and Roderick Hart for incisive comments on drafts of this manuscript. This study is part of a larger historical study of the rhetorical functions of manners in the United States, results of which can be obtained from the author.

Correspondence and requests for reprints: Kari Whittenberger-Keith, Department of Speech Communication, the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712.