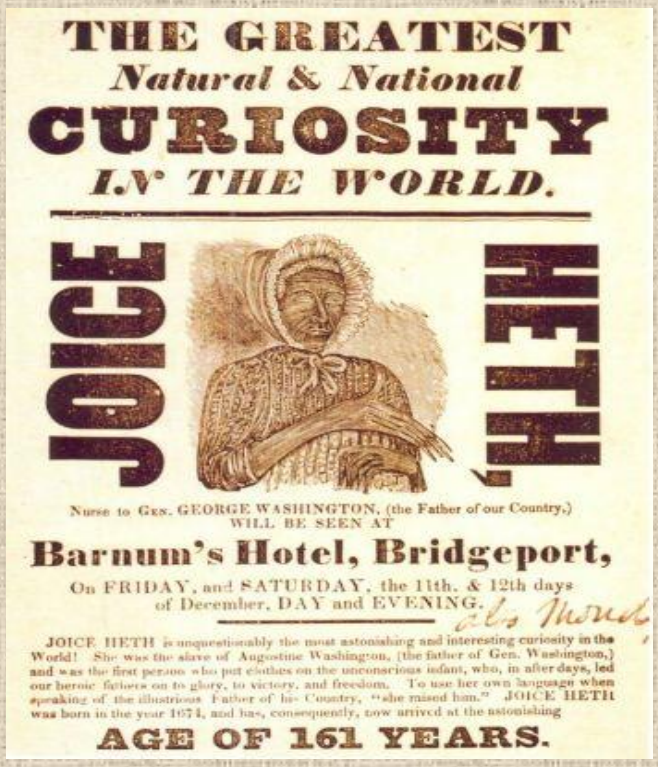
# Social Attitudes, Sensationalism and Phineas Taylor Barnum

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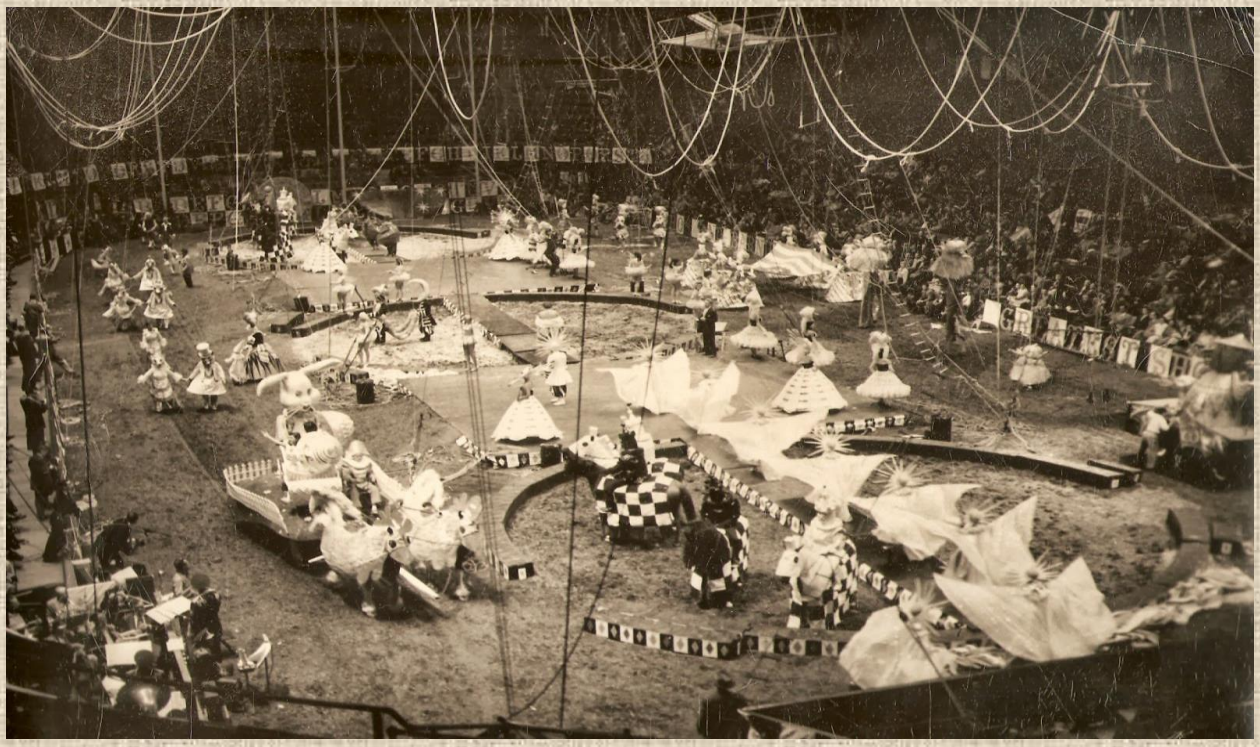
Abstract

More than one-hundred years after P.T. Barnum's death in 1891, the showman's propensity for showcasing exhibits of unbelievable and spectacular proportions lives on in a modern public still affected by his mastery of publicity and self-promotion. As one of three founding fathers in public relations history, Barnum is at once, the most controversial and the most celebrated. Well known for his extreme exaggeration, propaganda based marketing and persuasive abilities; Barnum's influence on modern day mass media culture is extensive. However, public opinions of Barnum throughout history are mixed as a result of Barnum's pursuit of profits at the cost of ethical responsibility. The following paper discusses Barnum's use of hyperbole, vulgarity and application of dominant social ideologies to promote the Barnum brand while simultaneously reinforcing harmful social attitudes of the dominant white culture during a pivotal point in history, particularly regarding the exhibition of Joice Heth.



Even in two-thousand-fourteen mention of the Barnum and Bailey Circus attracts attention and sparks excitement from those engaged in its discussion. Similarly, Phineas Taylor Barnum, as the circuses' founder and one of the founding fathers of public relations is best known for his ability to attract attention, curiosity, excitement and controversy as a museum curator, writer, politician, public relations practitioner, and showman extraordinaire of the 1800's. These pursuits gained Barnum enormous wealth and global infamy long before he joined rival J.A. Bailey as a circus ringleader near the end of his career. The self proclaimed "Prince of Humbugs"[1] used the power of press agency, sensationalist marketing tactics and unapologetic self promotion to persuade and manipulate potential audiences into purchasing admittance to museums, freak shows and circus shows. Driven by the relentless pursuit of profits, Barnum's use of vulgarity, hyperbole and keen attention to tenuous social and cultural attitudes provided the foundation for modern day mass popular culture.

Barnum entered the workforce, in 1825, at age fifteen, and for the next ten years Barnum worked in various professions including: retail clerk, legal lottery conductor, hat seller, owner of multiple stores, boardinghouse owner and the editor of a liberal penny press newspaper, called, "The Herald of Freedom."[2] The emergence of penny press newspapers during this time enabled the growing middle class access to the press by drastically reducing the price of newspapers from ten dollars to one penny. Barnum recognized the advertising potential newspapers provided as mass marketing tools writing, "Advertising is to a genuine article what manure is to the land—it largely increases the product."[3] Using propaganda at the core of his marketing strategy Barnum engaged audiences from a broad range of demographics.

While modern day public relations practitioners focus on developing credible brand images and avoid the use of propaganda in messages, Barnum embraced propaganda as an important

tool for increased publicity, used to incite public controversy regarding the authenticity of his spectacular and often overstated claims, never straying far from the adage, “There’s no such thing as bad publicity.” Barnum rationalized and glorified the deceptive nature of his advertisements in autobiographical tell-all books that made his actions transparent and bolstered his image in the eyes of the public, making him relatable, likable and increasing museum traffic from visitors interested in the challenge of identifying the underlying deceptions attractions contained.

Critics of Barnum compared his false promotion of exhibits to promotional strategies used by unethical medical companies swindling the public into purchasing worthless products under false claims of health benefits. Thomas Mickey references one such product, Pabst “Best” Tonic, a highly alcoholic substance endorsed by the media and medical professionals as a medicinal product and targeted to susceptible audiences including pregnant women and the elderly, in his book, *Deconstructing Public Relations: Public Relations Criticism*. The introduction of this product occurred three years after Barnum’s death and exemplifies the dangers of false promotion and the prevalence of propaganda based messaging in early public relations history. Mickey’s text suggests a need to deconstruct marketing campaigns to better understand the underlying social meanings of the symbols contained in promotional materials and the subsequent effect on social thought and behavior.

Barnum understood the importance of using messaging tactics that played into subvert cultural attitudes to influence popular opinion. His use of disfigured and physically anomalous “freaks” in his freak show resounded on a personal level with society members struggling to redefine social roles during the emergence of new social groups like the middle class and emancipated African Americans. By putting African Americans and other ethnic groups on

display in his shows, Barnum strengthened increasing attitudes of white superiority and unified public perceptions of "other" races as inferior and freakish in comparison to the dominant white class. The penny papers further embedded racist thoughts into mass audiences by publishing scientific reports delineating anatomical differences according to race. These widely published reports further established public support of mainstream ideologies distinguishing African Americans and Caucasians as socially and physically disparate.

Despite his role in supporting and proliferating negative stereotypes and attitudes of superiority among audiences, Barnum vehemently opposed the idea of disingenuous campaign advertising. Barnum stressed the benefit of his exaggerated marketing messages in building suspense and the added entertainment value suspense allotted the audience. He dismissed attacks questioning his integrity and even labeled his method of false promotion, humbuggery, distinguishing it from more malicious forms of printed deception.

Barnum argued his own advertisements based in humbuggery, not malevolence, engaged and entertained an audience open and willing to participate in his benevolent and entertaining form of deception stating, "humbug consists in putting on glittering appearances—outside shows—novel expedients, by which to suddenly arrest public attention and attract the public eye and ear…there are various trades and occupations which need only notoriety to insure success, always provided that when customers are once attracted, they never fail to get their money's worth." Barnum rationalized his exaggerated campaign tactics as necessary to attract public attention and bring traffic to shows for the public's benefit as well as his pocketbook's. He argued the entertainment value of the shows outweighed any discrepancies in promotional information, and ensured the enjoyment of the visitor regardless of preconceived expectations of the attractions. Some patrons even enjoyed the challenge of debunking Barnum's deceptions. Boorstin writes, "Contrary to

public belief, Barnum's great discovery was not how easy it was to deceive the public, but rather, how much the public enjoyed being deceived. Especially if they could see how it was being done."[4] Barnum's self-promotion and publicity efforts rivaled the fame seeking efforts of modern day reality television stars. Both categories of celebrities are generally dependent on vulgarity and unethical behavior to attract fans and are receptive to both positive and negative publicity to maintain media interest. Hosts on popular shows like *American Idol*, thrive on public criticism and often provoke and debase guests in true Barnum fashion to the delight of audiences. Deception on reality television is expected and encouraged in much the same manner Barnum's humbuggery received acclaim and allowance from the public. Public interest in Barnum's use of deception generated record book sales for Barnum's multiple autobiographies and reality television stars from shows like *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* and *Laguna Beach* reach comparable acclaim as autobiographical authors in modern markets.

Barnum's publicity tactics during periods of slow museum traffic included submitting anonymous claims of fraud against his own exhibits to penny press reporters to spark public controversy and increase traffic to events. This again, is comparable to modern tabloids that pay upwards of 30,000 dollars for juicy bits of celebrity information just to sell magazine copies. Barnum developed extravagant wording, formatting, and designs in his advertisements many still used in modern marketing. Most advertisements contained extensive use of superlatives, "…the tallest, the smallest, the fattest, the thinnest, the wildest, the woolliest, the weirdest, the well-I-never!—as did his personal achievements."[5] Using extensive self-promotion to build his reputation and image in the public eye, ""He was, according to his own publicity machine, "the wealthiest manager on the face of the earth," …nothing less than "the sun of the amusement world from which all lesser luminaries borrow light.""[6] Barnum considered publicity in any form

an asset, whether positive or negative in nature, and even once used a court appearance regarding his inhumane treatment of animals and children, the charges later dismissed, as an opportunity for puffery and promotion of his newest attractions to the courtroom audience.[7]

Cruelty and vulgarity provided the foundation for many of Barnum's exhibits and Barnum enjoyed the subsequent public controversy presented in the form of legal action and newspaper debates criticizing his lack of ethics and fraudulent business practices. The purchase of Joice Heth, in 1835, received much media attention and raised issues of ethical injustice regarding Heth's forced participation as a human oddity, due to her slave status and inability to find other, less degrading, work. Heth, a presumably one-hundred-sixty-one year old African American slave woman previously owned by George Washington's father and the presumed nursemaid to young George Washington provided Barnum the controversy and popularity he craved and launched his career as an entertainer.[8]

According to Reiss, "Joice Heth was advertised as weighing only forty-six pounds; she was blind and toothless and had deeply wrinkled skin; she was paralyzed in one arm and both legs; and her nails were said to curl like talons.[9] Barnum paid one thousand dollars in borrowed money for Heth's purchase and "From this endeavor, Barnum made about $1,500 per week. He was able to do this because of an amazing amount of advertising—brochures, posters, booklets, newspaper ads, et cetera—declaring her to be "the nurse of George Washington.""[10] On tour, Heth conversed with visitors, discussed George Washington's childhood, sang hymns, shook hands and endured public poking, prodding and pulse taking as well as public commentary on the deterioration of her aged body and interest in her eventual death and possible autopsy to authenticate her age.

As a Northerner in 1835, the time of Heth's purchase, the majority of African Americans enjoyed free status in the North, but exceptions did exist beyond Barnum's purchase of Heth. The gradual abolition of slavery in Northern states at the close of the Revolutionary War in 1804, spurred the emancipation of slaves but full emancipation did not occur until nationwide emancipation in 1865.[11] Barnum's choice to purchase a slave and promote her as an oddity during this time sparked public interest not only due to Heth's age and experience, but it additionally allowed the public a chance to ogle and publicly discuss social issues of race considered indecent by the church during a time of increasing social mobility and independence for free African Americans.

Barnum recognized and capitalized on the shifting social order and the struggle to determine new constructions of racial meaning by white populations desperate for distinction and perceived cultural superiority to the newly emergent class of free African Americans. According to Reiss, "The Heth autopsy—like other spectacular displays of race created by the emerging mass media—dramatized some of the new meanings of racial identity and provided an opportunity for whites to debate them (in a displaced register) as they gazed upon or read about her corpse."[12] In New York, the penny presses publicized Heth's life and death in a way reminiscent of modern tabloids, using falsified information and nonsensical propaganda to increase readership and remain competitive against rival papers. Appealing to the newly emergent white middle class, the penny papers promoted overtly racist attitudes toward African Americans and antagonism toward upper class society as a way of unifying the working class through a shared ideology of hatred and perceived superiority.

Six-penny papers, targeting upper class audiences and run by genteel publishers, condemned publication of stage shows, gossip and especially, human curiosities as vulgar and disgusting

topics not fit for publication or public consumption. These papers worried little about emerging race issues as race distinctions represented only one of a multitude of class separations apparent from the elite perspective.[13] On tour, in New England, the media, dominated by the genteel class, vilified Barnum and condemned the treatment and objectification of Heth and additionally criticized the penny presses for their denigrating commentary on the elderly woman responsible for raising George Washington.

The *Whiggish Atlas* wrote, "a more indecent mode of raising money than by the exhibition of an old woman—black or white—we can hardly imagine" and the Boston *Courier* addressed the issue more vehemently writing: "Those who imagine they can contemplate with delight a breathing skeleton, subjected to the same sort of discipline that is sometimes exercised in a menagerie to induce the inferior animals to play unnatural pranks for the amusement of barren spectators, will find food to their taste by visiting Joice Heth. But Humanity sickens at the exhibition." Barnum as a true master of publicity did not counter these objections to his personal ethics or his profession, but instead mounted a counter campaign regaling his influential role in the betterment of Heth's life. New advertisements emphasized Heth's cleanliness and religious fortitude and public circulation of a pamphlet containing Heth's biography additionally stressed Barnum's altruistic motives in removing Heth from conditions of squalor at the hands of previous slave owners. The pamphlet further extolled Barnum for providing Heth a much improved living situation in her years of most need and Heth's thankfulness to Barnum for this great kindness.[14] In this way Barnum manipulated negative accusations into an opportunity for self-promotion and positive image building, shaping public thought to benefit the Barnum brand.

The death of Joice Heth, seven months into Barnum's tour predictably attracted great public and media interest regarding the heavily promoted autopsy of her body. A great demand for

corpses (legally considered the common property of the country) from the scientific community, for research purposes, often led to riots and challenges by angry family members of the deceased. However, as a slave, the likelihood of family challenging or rioting against the scientific community for the retrieval of Heth's body lessened tremendously, prompting swift action by Barnum and scientists to produce a public autopsy.[15] The interests of the public and scientific communities regarding autopsies of African Americans stemmed from a desire "…to prove the African race's physiological uniqueness and mental inferiority through such means as measuring the cranial capacity and other physical features of large numbers of racially typed specimens."[16] Always driven by the desire for profit, Barnum charged viewers fifty-cents admission to the autopsy held in New York's City Saloon.[17]

Aware of the social meaning Heth's body represented to the dominant white culture, interested in seeking verifiable evidence of physical racial differences in human anatomy, Barnum capitalized on Heth's death, selling the body to the highest bidder for dissection and admitting 1500 spectators. The autopsy determined Heth's approximate age as eighty years old and resulted in controversy and rumors regarding possible explanations for the finding.

The autopsy of Heth undertaken as a means of authenticating and legitimizing messages made popular and widespread through mass media marketing characterizes more than a showman's deception, it reflects the urgent need of a dominant white culture to verify and solidify their superiority over the emancipated African American social groups. Barnum's promotion and ownership of "freaks" in his travelling shows reinforced mainstream acceptance of dominant white ideologies by reinforcing themes of white ownership and objectification of non-whites. Barnum, aware of the social implications and unspoken ideologies of the public, unethically used these attitudes to shape and influence public perceptions of himself and his brand.

Notes

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