

Headliners

A few words don't tell the whole story

I was working on an inclusion for our Popcorn series; in particular Popcorn P10 entitled England Expects. As it says on the ASOH Home page, there is nothing too serious here, and this particular one was a tongue-in-cheek look at some naval signal flags and their meanings, and how they might be applied to landlubbers with a sense of humour. At the time, our grandson came in and peered over my shoulder at the screen. I told him he might find this amusing, to which he replied: "Oh, I know all of them," and he walked away. I didn't bother trying to explain, thinking: typical teenager who already knows everything. Then I committed a cardinal sin by tarring the rest of his kind with the same brush: "Headliners, the lot of them!"

It was an unfair generalisation because there are plenty who don't always make assumptions based on a casual glimpse; but there are also many, both young and old, who do exactly that; and I have to admit that I am one of those on occasions. In a busy life it isn't possible for in-depth examination of every single piece of new information that comes our way, so we often tend to be temporary headliners. Newspapers and online news reports use the technique, a few poignant words that convey some of the content to follow; and frequently they are dramatised to make the reader or viewer want to find out a bit more. If the subject appeals they may at least start going through the article; if not they might assume what it is about and conclude that they already know this, and more of the same is of no further interest.

Instant dismissal of this kind is unlikely to have major consequences; not unless it is about something like health, new and important Covid protocols perhaps, that would disadvantage anyone who remained in ignorance of them. In the main, however, what does it matter? Take another example such as someone checking the TV guide for a movie to watch. Being a sensitive person who dislikes war and killing they wouldn't fancy "The Battle of Britain", but there's another: "The Last Boy Scout". Surely that would make for easier watching; but if they did give it a go they'd soon discover it wasn't about boys in shorts rubbing two sticks together to start a fire.

Aside from written words, the spoken kind can also be misconstrued. Ill-informed comments made in casual conversation can have long-reaching effects; especially when they are about a third party. "I noticed Chaz hugging some woman the other day, and it wasn't his wife." News of this kind is likely to circulate; and by the time the truth comes out – that the hug was simply a platonic meeting of two old friends who hadn't seen each other for ages – a reputation has been sullied and maybe a marriage compromised. Not only that, but friends of the couple in the spotlight might take sides, especially if some have more misinformation to further muddy the waters. Relationships change, animosity lingers, and the one who spread the false rumour in the first place will be in more than a few bad books.

Social disunity prompted by a chance observation seems to happen frequently, particularly when followed by an assumption which is personal and way off the mark. Now consider a headliner approach from a different viewpoint. First impressions count, they say, and I'm as guilty as anyone of misjudging a person's character, despite having absolutely no former knowledge of them. It might be that someone is introduced to me, a complete stranger, and I am already forming an opinion, maybe taking an instant dislike to them. But why, what could justify this? Well, it's just a feeling really, perhaps based on their expression, the way they avoid eye contact, their seemingly off-hand turn of phrase; or, worse still, a thought that they are regarding me with a similar kind of suspicion. Unfair, certainly, because neither of us has any idea what is on the other's mind; what problematic baggage we as individuals are carrying from a previous issue which could have left us bruised and defensive. We have simply imagined the chill of the encounter is coming from the other person; whereas it may well be a result of our own antagonistic attitude.

Obviously the best way is to glean and consider all of the facts before making an assumption about a situation. Voicing an opinion based on very little knowledge which may be totally inaccurate is to brand ourselves as just another headliner. I think the old saying is very pertinent – never judge a person until you have walked a mile in their shoes. Me being a closet headliner, however, I'd probably be inclined to say: "Chances are the shoes won't fit; and I don't even need thirty yards to know all there is to know about them!"

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