

Horatio Alger is Dying: Has TV News Noticed?

Abstract

Terms such as “rags to riches,” “Horatio Alger,” and pulling one’s self up by one’s “own bootstraps” are important to American self-identity. Several analyses, however, show social and economic mobility in the United States is in trouble. It is less frequent than in past generations, the U. S. now trails many nations in measures of movement, and one mechanism of mobility, education, is losing its effectiveness in that regard.

The researcher conducts a content analysis regarding social mobility terms in transcripts from NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News, ABC World News, MSNBC and Fox News. By various measures U. S. TV news almost exclusively presented unchallenged the mythology of mobility, rather than any debunking of it. What little debunking occurred largely was on MSNBC. Both MSNBC and Fox frequently presented social and economic mobility (and persons who are examples of it) in partisan terms, while network TV newscasts did not.

Rags-to-riches stories are woven into the narrative of American greatness. Pulling one's self up by one's own bootstraps often is the phrase used both to encourage and to exalt this phenomenon. The rags-to-riches theme was so common in the popular stories by Horatio Alger, Jr., that the author's name itself is now shorthand for the theme.

Yet, for all theme repetition, the actual rate of social and economic mobility, by almost any measure tracked, has been declining in the United States for several decades. Thus, U. S. journalism faces a conundrum. Does it follow society's meta-narratives of story telling, the master myths of news as described by Lule (2001)? Or, does journalistic content "prick the bubble" of the myth, pointing out its unlikelihood and its declining probability?

The challenge is particularly acute for broadcast news with its traditions of short, simple, visual, and emotional storytelling. Print, web, and broadcast news all can and do employ a compelling case study technique as a way to personalize and to demonstrate an issue. Broadcast news, however, may lack the time or depth to muddy the matter with counter-thematic questions of scale, scope, and trends.

Literature Review

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2010) examined established intergenerational mobility measures, such as father-to-

son earnings and education, and concluded, "Mobility in earnings, wages and education across generations is relatively low in France, southern European countries, the United Kingdom and the United States. By contrast, such mobility tends to be higher in Australia, Canada and the Nordic countries." The OECD findings echo work by Corak (2004, 2006) and Jäntti et al (2006).

Isaacs, Sawhill, and Haskins (2008) compiled a report on economic mobility for The Brookings Institution. It demonstrated, "All Americans do not have an equal shot at getting ahead, and one's chances are largely dependent on one's parents' economic position...The chances of making it to the top of the income distribution decline steadily as one's parents' family income decreases" (p. 19). Most quintile-to-quintile motion is in the middle of the family income scale; the poor and rich have the highest likelihood of staying in that position. Further, increased inequality of income distribution in the U. S. means that "since the rungs of the ladder are further apart than they used to be, the effects of family background on one's ultimate economic success are larger and may persist for a longer period of time" (p. 32). The report also noted that the U. S. falls in the mid-range of international mobility measures, and the lowest mobility rates were clustered at the bottom of the U.S. income ladder. "The findings from cross-country research challenge the traditional view of the United States as a land with more mobility and opportunity than other countries," concluded the report (pp. 41-42).

While bottom quintile to top quintile hopping is highly unlikely in a generation, storied and extreme rags-to-riches stories are even more rare.

Hertz (2006) found that children from low-income families have only a one percent chance of reaching the top five percent of income distribution.

Children in the middle quintile did not fare much better, just a 1.8 percent likelihood of reaching that same high-income group. By contrast, the children of the upper strata had a 22 percent rate of reaching the top five percent of income.

Hertz further found that the U.S. trailed France, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Norway, and Denmark in intergenerational mobility. Only the United Kingdom had less class mobility than the United States among similar high-income countries. The “rungs farther apart” phenomenon also has been growing worse. Sawhill and Morton (2008) point out there has been no income advancement, adjusted for inflation, for the younger generations. In fact, men in their thirties as a group have on average 12 percent less income than their fathers’ generation at the same age. “This suggests the up-escalator that has historically endured that each generation would do better than the last may not be working very well,” they wrote.

Michael Moore (2003) penned a devastating critique of the Horatio Alger myth as a key factor regarding ineffective public action against CEO abuses. He wrote:

It is first prescribed to us as children in the form of a fairy tale—but a fairy tale that can actually come true! It is the Horatio Alger myth. Alger was one of the most popular

American writers of the late 1800s. His stories featured characters from impoverished backgrounds who, through pluck and determination and hard work, were able to make huge successes of themselves in this land of boundless opportunity. The message was that anyone can make it in America, and make it big.

We are addicted to this happy rags-to-riches myth in this country.... Despite all the damage and all the evidence to the contrary, the average American still wants to hand on to this belief that maybe, just maybe, he or she (mostly he) just might make it big after all. So don't attack the rich man, because one day that rich man may be me!

The Horatio Alger/Own Bootstraps/Rags to Riches Myth certainly has a strong presence in public opinion. Pew (2009) asked respondents to rate on a zero-to-ten scale about how well statements described the American Dream. "Being able to succeed regardless of the economic circumstances in which you were born" scored a perfect ten with 34% of respondents, and another 26% giving it an eight or nine. Similarly, the statement "your children being better off financially than you" scored ten with 35% of respondents, and eight or nine with another 29%.

CBS News / *New York Times* several times has asked poll respondents, “Do you think it’s still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich?”

Date	Possible	Not Possible	Don’t Know	N
April 22-26, 1981*	67	28	3	1439
January 16-19, 1983	57	38	5	1597
July 31-August 3, 1988 **	59	35	6	1353
February 22-24, 1996	70	27	3	1223
March 20-21, 1996	78	18	4	1001
April 15-20, 1998 (NYT)	70	29	2	1395
February 6-10, 2000	84	13	3	1499
July 13, 2003 (Hispanic oversample)	70	27	3	3092
June 26-28, 2007	81	18	1	836
April 1-5, 2009	72	24	4	998

* Alternate wording: Do you think it's possible nowadays for someone in this country to start out poor, and become rich by working hard? Two percent volunteered it was possible through other means.

** Alternate wording: Do you think it’s as possible now as it was when you finished school to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich?

Of course, as McNamee and Miller (2004, p. 11) have pointed out, “the mere *possibility* of getting rich is not the same as the *likelihood* of getting

rich." They further point out that that meritorious personal characteristics such as talent and hard work certainly play a role in social and economic mobility, but these traits themselves have social origins. High moral standards, they note, can work against such mobility. "It is not innate capacity alone, or the proper frame of mind alone that makes a difference. Rather it is a *combination* of opportunity and these factors that make a difference" (p. 45).

Several researchers (Hertz 2006; Haskins, 2008) have noted the importance of education as a means to achieve social mobility. Recent numbers, however, suggest that road hardly is a meritocracy. The U.S. Department of Education in 1988 began a longitudinal study of students then in 8th grade, following them for 12 years. A notable pattern could be found in the data about college graduation. Those who in 1988 were in the lowest quartile of family income but the top quartile of math test scores had a 29 percent college graduation rate. The inverse, top quartile of family income but bottom quartile of math scores, had a 30 percent college graduation rate (Roy, 2005).

Ornstein (2007) adds that such opportunities are shrinking, leaving meritocracy a hollow shell or a false promise:

A new form of arrogance can develop by the creation of meritocracy, by the same people who once believed in and exemplified the political theories of Jeffersonian democracy and

the stories of Horatio Alger. If true merit becomes associated with *heredity* or innate ability, as it is often construed, as opposed to the notion of *opportunity*, [then] meritocracy becomes less of a virtue and more of a propaganda tool for patricians and conservatives to wave and use against the populace who have fewer opportunities because of their social and economic status.

One really cannot cover class mobility without mentioning the subject of class, and television news does not have a good record in this regard. Heider and Fuse (2004) conducted a combined content analysis and participant observation study of Denver local television news in July 1998. Newscast producers and reporters well understood the desired audience for their program was suburban women aged 25 to 54. Though class rarely was stated, this targeted demographic played a key role in news gatekeeping decisions. The poor simply weren't "on the radar" of local television news, and only 1.9 percent of all stories during the study period were about the needy.

Lule's "Master Myths of News" draws inspiration from: Mircea Eliade, philosopher and historian of religion, who saw myth as quintessentially human; Joseph Campbell who found myth ubiquitous; and Jung who saw myth as essential. Lule readily admits the claim can be overstated—a house fire story can be just a house fire story—but he argues that news has habits,

traditions, and shortcuts that all draw from the human traditions of storytelling. After all, news people do refer to their output as stories, not just reports.

Lule discerns seven master myths in news. One from his list, The Hero, is quite pervasive and includes elements of success and social mobility:

Heroes remind people that they can succeed, that they can achieve greatness. Hercules, Karna, Gilgamesh, Ulysses, Achilles, and Samson are just a few heroes whose exploits are celebrated in myth. Heroes also subtly offer limitations by telling stories of *who* can succeed and *how*. As myth, news stories too regularly celebrate the exploits of heroes. From sports stars to movie stars, astronauts to artists, presidents to prime ministers, the news tells stories of heroic men and women. The news produces and reproduces the timeless pattern: the humble birth, the early mark of greatness, the quest, the triumph, and the return. The news daily brings us stories of the Hero, stories that proclaim—but also help define—greatness (p. 23).

Do U. S. newscasts tell us such heroic stories, but ignore the reality of declining social mobility? One complicating factor in answering that question is the increasing political polarization of continuous (“24/7”) cable news

operations. Fox News has a documented and deserved pro-Republican and pro-conservative slant (Groeling and Baum, 2007), and conservative viewers seek it out for that reason (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009). MSNBC recently has offered, at least in its prime-time programs, a contrary point of view.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Research Question One asks what picture of social and economic mobility will U. S. television news programs present? The past observations strongly suggest that U. S. television news will tilt strongly toward repetition of the mythology rather than any questioning of it.

The political polarization of the 24/7 cable news operations allows for the testing of two hypotheses:

Hypothesis One: Stories from the 24/7 cable news operations Fox News and MSNBC will be more likely than stories from the network newscasts (CBS Evening, NBC Nightly, and ABC World) to invoke and involve political parties in the text of social and economic mobility stories.

Hypothesis Two: Among the 24/7 cable news operations, Fox News will do the least amount of myth debunking, will MSNBC will do the most myth debunking.

Methods

The researcher conducted a keyword search of the Broadcast Transcripts area of Lexis Nexis Academic. The search terms were: economic mobility, social mobility, upward mobility, downward mobility, Horatio Alger, own bootstraps, or rags to riches. The search was conducted on January 6-7, 2011, but covered all available dates for transcripts. The search yielded 55 transcripts from MSNBC, 68 from Fox News, and 46 from the network TV evening newscasts, ABC World News, CBS Evening News, and NBC Nightly News. By far, the greatest number of "hits" was for rags to riches at 84, compared to 41 for upward mobility and 36 for Horatio Alger. Eleven transcripts had "own bootstraps," compared to six, five, and four respectively for social mobility, downward mobility, and economic mobility. One irrelevant hit involving a racehorse named Rags to Riches was discarded.

The transcripts were trimmed to just the story in which the keyword occurred, encompassing everything from anchor toss to any tag elements-- including, especially on cable, any discussion segment. The stories were saved as Microsoft Word documents with a separate document for each provider, and all stories having an ending code marker so they could be separated for individual story analysis. The files were entered into WordStat and ODA Miner for analysis.

Findings

Rags-to-riches stories and Horatio Alger tales may be a subset of larger Hero myths or a unique mythology all their own, one heavily intertwined with notions of America and the American Dream. Regardless, the news transcripts analyzed present those mythologies largely in an unchallenged form.

The search terms yielded a total of 187 references in 172 stories. “Rags to riches” was by far the most used of the search terms, appearing 84 times. Most stories merely used the terms in personal narratives about people, often implicitly or explicitly praising both the principle and the people. The fifteen stories with the words downward mobility, social mobility, or economic mobility did, however, take a more serious account of the larger trends.

Those latter fifteen stories did in some way qualify the accepted mythology of upward mobility, if not directly debunk it. Three MSNBC stories presented the harsh recent data on mobility, each time as a challenge to trickle down economics. Fox News casually and incidentally mentioned that neither George W. Bush nor Al Gore were Horatio Alger stories. Otherwise, Fox generally presented the social mobility mythology words unchallenged, especially in telling tales of successful businessmen. Fox and MSNBC both were more likely than the network newscasts to mention rags-to-riches or Horatio Alger in reference to entertainers or political figures. Of particular note was who were presented as a rags-to-riches or Horatio Alger stories:

Table 1. References to Persons as Rags-to-Riches or Horatio Alger stories

Rags to Riches, or Horatio Alger References	Networks	Fox	MSNBC
Entertainers	4	8	10
Business persons	10	14	3
Politicians	2	13	15
Other Persons	5	2	5
Non-Persons (ideas, plots, animals, etc.)	12	10	9

“Own bootstraps” was used in a very limited manner. MSNBC and NBC each used a sound bite from then-candidate Barack Obama talking about how Republicans insist on that approach “even if you don’t have boots.” Fox twice used the same bite. Fox’s Neil Cavuto also used “own bootstraps” glowingly in reference to a business owner, as did one NBC report. On MSNBC boxing promoter Don King twice used the phrase in reference to himself. One *Hardball* guest echoed Obama’s claim about the phrase, and one critic used it in a disparaging review of the Disney film *American Heart and Soul*. CBS used “own bootstraps” to describe Clarence Thomas’ judicial philosophy. ABC and CBS respectively had a painting contractor and a hurricane cleanup volunteer advocating that philosophy and using the phrase.

The researcher also conducted an additional analysis to see what three word phrases also came up in these news stories identified. Some of the most

common included: the American people, the American dream, the American public, only in America, millions of dollars, and the middle class. The Republican Party and The Democratic Party also occurred frequently, but only in the MSNBC (13 Democratic, 11 Republican) and Fox transcripts (9 Democratic, 14 Republican) and not at all in those of the network news stories.

These results, combined with those showing a heavy use of rags-to-riches and Horatio Alger references for politicians, support Hypothesis One. Fox and MSNBC were more likely than the network newscasts to mingle partisan and political themes into social and economic mobility stories. Hypothesis Two also was supported. Generally rags-to-riches themes were passed along unchallenged, but what little critical debunking occurred happened largely on MSNBC.

One particularly telling moment was on the September 20, 2010, edition of MSNBC's *Hardball*. Host Chris Matthews seemed stunned about the economic mobility realities being described by guest Arianna Huffington:

HUFFINGTON: And you know, Chris, they`re not just afraid of the reset. They`re living the reset. A hundred million people in this country are now living at a standard of living that is not as good as their parents at the same age. We are number 10 in upward mobility, you know, behind France and Germany and (INAUDIBLE) You know, they are doing...

MATTHEWS: Above France? We`re below France in upward mobility?

HUFFINGTON: We are below France. Exactly. They`re doing the American dream better than we are. We should...

MATTHEWS: Wait a minute. I thought in France, you got used to the fact that your father was a baker, you`re a baker. If your grandfather was a shoemaker, you`re a shoemaker. You`re telling me that they`re...

HUFFINGTON: Yes.

MATTHEWS: ... they`ve broken out of that?

HUFFINGTON: I`m telling you these numbers have changed, and basically now the middle class life has become a game of chance. If you`re lucky, you`ll have a middle class life.

Regarding Research Question One, U. S. television news rather consistently presented a picture of social and economic mobility that repeats and promotes the mythology rather than any questioning of it. The audience largely gets stories praising the life stories of individuals, rather than any mention of the larger trend—namely that such stories are becoming less common and more difficult to achieve, and that the mechanisms for such mobility are under stress.

Discussion

These findings about television news content complement what others have noted about television entertainment programming. Maghbouleh (2007) summarized that social class rarely is directly addressed in scripts or storylines, and representations remain an under-analyzed area. One early tally found that only eleven of the 262 network domestic sitcoms aired between 1946 and 1990 portrayed working-class characters and experiences. Further, between 1955 and 1971 not a single new working-class domestic sitcom appeared on TV. Sitcoms, she noted, tilt toward middle-class and upper-middle-class experiences. Evening dramas often feature the professional class or the hyper-wealthy. The working class now can be found in some daytime talk shows and “reality” programs, but in the latter “exaggerations and rehabilitations of class figure heavily in the premises of these shows” (p. 853).

This analysis found that nationally distributed U. S. television news, network newscasts and cable television reports, generally presented the mythologies of social and economic mobility without complicating the story by mentioning counter-thematic realities. Rags-to-riches, Horatio Alger tales fit the American ethos of who we think we are. Newscasts use that story frame, unmindful or ignoring the substantial evidence it is an unrepresentative and increasingly unlikely tale of who we really are.

This research hardly would have been worth the effort if it merely documented a failing in scale, scope, and emphasis of broadcast news coverage of a particular topic. Trade press articles have documented

superficial coverage of fleeting spot news events and an array of public policy topics. American notions of rags-to-riches opportunities, however, are key to self-identity, political imperatives, and our understanding of societal superstructure.

As the Pew Research Center (2011) has pointed out, very rarely does 90% of the U. S. public line up on any poll question answer. Yet, 90% of Pew respondents routinely and consistently agree with the statement “I admire people who get rich by working hard.” Only two other questions consistently received 90% agreement in nearly a quarter-century of Pew political value surveys. Those two were “I feel it’s my duty as a citizen to always vote” and “It’s best for the future of our country to be active in world affairs.”

Significant social, political, and economic questions likely would emerge if those respondents knew how remote, and increasingly difficult, the “work hard, get rich” theme really was. U. S. television news messages have not played a significant role in that realization; and, in fact, largely perpetuate an increasingly unlikely mythology.

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