

Ray Suarez: Thank you very much for having me. One of the real treats of being asked to speak at a session like this is that I get to talk about things that are always on my mind, but I don't often have an opportunity. The people who run newsrooms don't believe the coverage of race and class generates viewership and readership. And since in the main, we have a model for American media that's based on generating audience, it is simply put, bad for business.

Americans are in deep denial regarding matters of class, how race affects life chances, and the opportunity structure general in the United States. So while mass market reporting doesn't take too many chances when speaking to the broad audience. We don't want to tell them anything that makes them unhappy. There's a quantity problem and a quality problem too. Since I've spent most of my career in broadcasting I'll concentrate, but not confine, my remarks to that part of the business.

Too often the reporting doesn't take the viewer, the listener, the reader to anyplace new, anyplace challenging, maybe uncomfortable. Instead, our reporting on race and class tends to tread well-trod ground, reinforce ideas that the audience already holds. Reporters navigate these terrains of class and race like experienced old hands, which we are. We traffic so blindly and so constantly in class-rooted images, especially on TV, but certainly in the printed press as well, that the doing of it achieves a kind of transparency. We don't even have to say we're doing it anymore, we just make this meta-wink at the audience, which is watching in metropolitan areas especially, in homes that cross every boundary of class and status.

When I say we traffic in those images on television, I mean they are a kind of currency, I mean that we use them in place of language. The images are a language so thoroughly understood at every end of the transaction by the interviewer, by the interviewee, and by the end user of the images, that is the audience that they don't need to be pointed out and identified. They don't need to be underscored in any way when we marry a narration track to a series of pictures to convey information in a nutsy, boltsy just the facts, ma'am kind of denotative way, and, connotatively in that other language. They are the subtitles that we don't need because everybody whose watching is already bilingual, or thinks they are.

You are unlikely to turn on the television and see a group of white young men, face down on the streets with their hands behind their necks. Is it because white men never do anything wrong? No, you know it's not that. It's just that when young white men get arrested, police are less likely to roust them out of a cell and parade them in front of cameras, the legendary perp walk. And because television stations have their resources concentrated in dense urban areas, they are more likely to shoot things that happen closer to the station. That's just geography as much as it is racial profiling.

This tends to reinforce unspoken assumptions about correlations between race and class and race and crime that are in fact not true, but are sustained by the language and the images streaming from the television day after day. When there is the tragic death of a young person, do middle class people not lose their composure, do middle class people not mourn in an emotional way? Of course they do. We just tend not to see it in the same way on television. Private moments are less likely to happen in public in McLean, thus

less likely to be seen, photographed, and then transmitted to your eyeballs on the 11 o'clock news.

With money comes the ability to exert control over when and where and under what circumstances one is seen. With money comes the ability to put mediating layers between oneself and the unwanted gaze of the news business.

In the economy of images presented by television, with less money comes less ability to control the gaze of others, less ability to control self-representation, less ability to block that unwanted gaze. It's a very powerful thing to have the privilege of self-description. The ability to be an expert about the facts of your own life.

Much of journalism identifies, involves identifying and locating credible sources of opinion and striking a bargain. Give me your opinion and I will give you access to the public's eyes and ears. We will live symbiotically, you and I. Because I put you on TV, you will be made an expert and because you are an expert you will give my product the kind of public heft.

Lower educational attainment, lower income, and lower class means you are less likely to be considered an expert about anything, even your own life. So, while you may be perfectly able to explain what's hard about getting healthcare when you have no insurance, your plight will be used merely as an illustration, while your predicament will be explained by an expert. You are raw material rather than a witness to your own life. While a higher status person is given the job of context, the big picture, the systemic challenges of being a lower status individual.

The public has a very finely tuned calibration about how it assigns class location. It's a funny, supple, mutable world and communications media like the news business play with and manipulate these definitions with a knowing wink. When the guys at the loading dock split a Powerball ticket and split an \$80 million jackpot, reporters chronicle in loving detail the life choices the winners are about to make. Whether or not they will keep their job, whether or not they plan to move, what kind of boat and pickup truck they're going to buy without even saying it, the grinning anchor woman and the reporter going live from the scene jocularly describe how a now rich, but low class person is going to change their life expectations. A winner's authenticity is praised, the idea that money will not change him or her. I would love to see the face on one of these grinning, college educated, six-figure earning, faux-regular guys, if the jackpot winner said, Please leave me alone, get out of my face with that camera, and if you insist on coming to my house, I will call the police. Or, just, I'd love to see the reaction if one of them said, I'm going to get my teeth fixed, I'm going to pay off my mortgage, I'm going to go to college and I'm not taking any further questions. Thank you.

Because mass market news is a story told by high-status people about higher and lower-status people to lower-status people, class is woven into the DNA of the news. It's an enterprise that proposes to operate in the public service interest of the greatest number of people while it exists also as a profit making business, creating dividends for the wealthiest Americans.

The class tensions inside national network news and even the commercials that pay for that news can sometimes be hilarious in their assumptions. Assumptions basically

that we never question or even deconstruct. If you were a stranger to our country and assigned to learn about it by watching television and reading the newspapers, the America you would assemble in your head would be wildly different from the one that actually exists. You would come away from your week or month or year in front of the tube convinced that American households are richer than they are, that more people are knowledge workers, business travelers and rich people than any of those things that are actually true in the society. If I see another commercial that just involves people sitting around a table knocking around ideas all afternoon in an ad to get you to buy some new computer system or some new software program or something and I think, Really is this the way people really live? They don't actually have to come home tired at the end of the work day because all they did was talk to each other around a desk and figure out what they were going to order for lunch.

You would think that Americans are not strung out on debt, carrying more than \$9,000 in credit cards payments from month to month. Turn on the Today Show in the winter time and there's a smiling feature reporter doing a live shot from the Consumer Electronics show in Las Vegas happily walking the hosts back in New York through the high-priced gee-whiz that will soon be coming to the shelves. Tune in a month later and another reporter might be doing the same from the Detroit auto show.

In a country where the middle quintile of American families earns about \$45,000 in household income, cars costing \$45,000 and much, much more are featured on the Today Show. The effect of dollar weakness on the cost of overseas travel is covered in detail for an audience where between 10 and 15 percent have passports. In a country where an ever-shrinking portion of the population owns a greater and greater share of the wealth, gyrations in the stock market are detailed to the hundredths of points without much of an effort made to connect the activities of market players to the very, very small holdings usually in a 401K, usually in a mutual fund of the average American family.

That most black and Latino households have no net worth at all is rarely mentioned. That the inability to hold real estate in a family portfolio as a performing asset to make intergenerational transfer of wealth possible does not intrude on the class driven, but at the same time allergic to talking about class world presented in the popular press.

Athletes, entertainers, performer millionaires, like Donald Trump, all inhabit different class realms in the mass media world, but the kind of structural underpinnings of class that make America what it is, does not make TV what it is. We don't get the real picture. The realities of class in America intrude only in elite media. So you get really wonderful reporting, terrific reporting from people like Janny Scott at the New York Times, their tremendous series, How Race is Lived in America, or On Being a Black Man in the Washington Post. These are hard things to explain to people who don't live them. These are difficult things to cover as a reporter, yet very few places actually bother to try. The secret knowledge that a class straddler or climber learns on the way up from the barrio, the shape-shifting and self-composition you might undergo on the subway ride from a law office downtown to Fort Totten is simply not a fit topic for conversation.

The only time we tend to hear about class is when we try to talk about it and then the conversation is mow-mowed back into a corner by the accusation of class warfare.

Reporters are very sensitive to these kinds of things and they go back in the corner with the rest of everybody who doesn't want to talk about these things.

A person killed on their stoop is easily and off the top of our head described by a reporter as being at the wrong place at the wrong time without every really trying to analyze what your own stoop, being the wrong place to be, really means. Why don't we ever unpack that idea? Instead we just repeat the cliché night after night after night.

When the tables are turned and a high status or wealthy person is killed in someplace where people don't normally get killed, you can hear the tone of outrage and surprise almost the stricken-ness, not of the witnesses and the people who speak on tape, but of the reporter, him or herself channeling the fear of people who thought they had made well enough and paid well enough that they didn't have to worry about the mess of the real world barging into their orderly lives.

The distaste for and the condescension toward poor people in a lot of conventional news reporting can sometimes be jaw-droppingly obvious. Like listening to millionaire anchors describe the violence in Los Angeles following the Rodney King verdicts or the very easy seamless acceptance of police-generated, umbrella narratives of tension in poor and minority neighborhoods. The need for acceptable leaders to go down and talk to those people to calm them down. Cases like the Sean Bell shooting immediately throw up a scaffolding of class interests in which certain people, almost like they were sent the script in advance, side with the police while others in a similar way side with the victim.

I could go on, I won't. Thank you.