

Dialogues

Diatribes

It's simple: One builds up, the other tears down. Unfortunately, pique sells better than thoughtfulness, at least in the eyes of the media.

Boston has been polarized by a dispute, according to the Boston Globe: "Both sides dug in their heels on a delicate racial issue." The source of the dispute? Boston magazine featured a profile of Henry Louis Gates Jr., chair of Harvard's Afro-American studies program, under the headline "Head Negro in Charge."



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Many in Boston, including the mayor, considered the headline racist because it derives from a phrase describing a head slave. The magazine maintained blacks themselves use the phrase for prominent black figures. Editor Craig Unger was reportedly surprised by demands the magazine apologize for the headline, which, he said, "was thought about very carefully." It was not intended to be racist. It was simply meant to be provocative.

The Boston magazine incident leaped out at me because it contained two elements of what I call the "argument culture" — our obsession with turning everything into a metaphorical battle. One element is the role played by headlines; the other is the goal of being "provocative." I have had personal experiences with both.

In 1995, a theater in Arlington, Va., produced two plays I had written about family relationships. The director, wanting to contribute to the reconciliation between blacks and Jews, mounted my plays in repertory with two one-act plays by African-American playwright Caleen Sinnette

Jennings. We both had plays about three sisters. We both had plays exploring the ethnic identities of our families and the relationship between those identities (Jewish for me, African-American for her) and the American context in which we grew up.

To stir interest in the plays and to explore the parallels between our works, the theater planned a public dialogue between Jennings and me.

The theater's public relations volunteer prepared a flier announcing the public dialogue. I was horrified. It said Caleen and I would discuss "how past traumas create understanding and conflict between blacks and Jews today" — trying to grab by the throat an issue we wished to address indirectly. Yes, we were concerned with conflict between blacks and Jews, but neither of us is an authority on it, and we had no intention of expounding on it.

We hoped to do our part to ameliorate that conflict by

Editor's note

Within mainstream journalism, it's easy to find spirited conversations about how the media relate to readers and viewers. In the context of examining the craft, "The Argument Culture" came to our attention. Linguist Deborah Tannen's new book, especially its chapters on media, proved valuable for challenging old habits. We asked her to apply her research and experience for Pioneer Press readers in this column.

focusing on commonalities. Our plays had many resonances between them. We wanted to talk about our plays, and let the resonances speak for themselves.

Fortunately, we intercepted the fliers. New ones promised something we could deliver: "a discussion of heritage, identity, and complex family relationships in African-American and Jewish-American culture as represented in their plays." Jennings noticed the original flier said the evening would be "provocative" and changed it to "thought-provoking." What a world of difference is implied in that small change: how much better to make people think, rather than simply to "provoke" them — as often as not, to anger.

My other experience alerted me to the power of headlines. In 1996 I wrote in a national magazine about apologies. I explored both the good that apologies can do and why so many people resist uttering them. I also discussed the gender dimension: In our culture, men are more likely than women to avoid apologizing. But I carefully explained that there are many exceptions to this pattern — and that saying "I'm sorry" is not always preferable. A large portion of my essay discussed cultural differences and compared public and private apologies.

It appeared as the cover article, titled "Why Men Don't Apologize." The subhead inside read, "A simple statement of contrition can fix an honest mistake. So why can't men seem to do it?" When I saw the article in proof, I pleaded with the editor to change this and was told it was too late — and furthermore, that headlines have to attract attention. I paid the price. A caller to a talk show was typical: "I have followed Dr. Tannen's work for years and always appreciated her evenhandedness. This is the first time she offended me."

Attempts to polarize debate to attract attention often stir up animosity that spreads like a fever. Serious consequences are often unintended: Exploiting points of conflict to get a rise out of people, though easy and "provocative," can open old wounds or create new ones that are hard to heal. It creates more of the conflict and polarization that threaten our ability to solve the problems we face.

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