Opinion: Greatest story ever told about hyperbole

By Jennifer Mercieca

In 1835, Phineas Taylor Barnum was anxious to find an "amusement" to attract paying customers. One lucky day a stranger told Barnum that he possessed half-ownership of a "curiosity": a woman named Joice Heth who was the 161-year-old slave who raised George Washington.

Barnum examined Heth and the stranger's "proofs" about her age and provenance and, convinced of her seeming veracity, bought Heth from the stranger. Soon he was drawing crowds to see Joice Heth recount George Washington's childhood. Barnum also paid off newspaper editors to write up the story of Joice Heth in the most dramatic way possible.

Barnum's advertising strategy depended "upon getting people to think, and talk, and become curious and excited over and about the 'rare spectacle'." His tool was hyperbole. While P.T. Barnum is often remembered as the founder of a circus – "The Greatest Show on Earth"–Barnum's story is more broadly about America's fascination with hyperbole and humbug.

Hyperbole is the rhetorical term for "excess" (Greek hyper "beyond" plus bole "to throw," to overthrow or throw beyond). Aristotle thought of hyperbole as a kind of metaphor, a comparison between a known thing and an unknown thing. In comparing something that is unknown to something that is already well understood, audiences would make sense of new information by using associational logic. Yet, Aristotle thought that because hyperbole relied on excessive exaggeration, its users abused the power of metaphor and demonstrated a "vehemence of character." In the 18th century, Joseph Priestley argued that hyperbole was unjustly used to

appeal to “persons of little reading” who were particularly attracted to the “very extravagant” or the “marvelous and supernatural.” Hyperbole drew attention to itself, for the sake of merely drawing attention.

Which is why Barnum relished it.

For a time, Barnum writes in his 1855 “Autobiography,” ticket sales for the Heth show were great and business was good and he was happy. Then disaster stuck. “A Visitor” wrote to one local paper and claimed that Joice Heth was what the hip school kids of the 1750s called a “humbug.” Specifically, “A Visitor” believed that Heth was “not a human being,” but was “simply a curiously constructed automaton, made up of whalebone, India-rubber, and numberless springs, ingeniously put together, and made to move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator.”

The attack on Heth didn’t hurt Barnum’s show; it made it bigger. Barnum would recall that “hundreds who had not visited Joice Heth were now anxious to see the curious automaton; while many who had seen her were equally desirous of a second look, in order to determine whether or not they had been deceived.”

Joice Heth passed away in early 1836, ending Barnum’s show but not the nation’s curiosity. Barnum took advantage of that interest: 1,500 audience members paid 50 cents each—double what audiences had paid to see her alive—to watch David L. Rogers conduct an autopsy. According to the Feb. 25, 1836, edition of the *New York Sun*, Rogers concluded that Heth was a real person but nearer to 80 than to 160.

But, Barnum had the last word. He planted a story with the *Sun*’s competitor, the *New York Herald* on Feb. 27, 1836, which claimed that the Heth humbug story was itself humbug. Heth was “not dead,” but alive and well in Connecticut.

Why did Barnum’s hyperbole and humbug excite American

audiences in the 19th century? For the same reason that it excites Americans today: We love to be amused and we love excess, and so we reward showmen with our attention.

We're especially attracted to hyperbole during times of great transition, when things are confusing and reality can be more easily distorted. Barnum knew this too: His "A Visitor" exposé/humbug relied upon the nation's curiosity about the emerging technology of machinery, new commercial uses for India rubber, and new northern concerns over the abolition of slavery.

Today is another time of great transition and America's showmen-leaders knowing it. During an election interview with NBC in 2016, Donald Trump said he had enjoyed being compared to P.T. Barnum. "We need P.T. Barnum, a little bit, because we have to build up the image of our country," he said.

Ask yourself: Was Barnum and Bailey's circus literally the "greatest show on Earth"? Of course not, that's nonsensical hyperbole: But in a supposedly classless society like America, such confident appeals to American greatness via hyperbole attract audiences.

And we shouldn't forget that "there's a sucker born every minute." Barnum has been credited with that phrase, but probably never said that. Of course, there's a humbug that says he did.

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