

The media and the man with the “golden voice”

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Over the past week the US media, and in particular the cable news networks, have exploited the story of Ted Williams for the most reactionary and self-serving purposes.

Now known as the man with the “golden voice,” until just a few days ago, Williams had been living on the streets of Columbus, Ohio, panhandling to survive. In an appeal to passing motorists for donations, Williams carried a sign explaining to people that he was a talented, one-time radio announcer down on his luck. A local reporter from the *Columbus Dispatch* asked Williams for a demonstration, which he then posted on the Internet.

This YouTube video of Williams’ uniquely rich baritone immediately went “viral,” garnering some 2 million hits. At that point, the story was picked up by the major media outlets, which have turned Williams into an overnight celebrity.

Their aim is to boost ratings and make as much money as possible out of this media-manufactured “American Dream” story, while attempting to paint themselves as somehow sympathetic to the plight of ordinary people. They have been joined by other sections of big business, which see significant financial opportunities in Williams’ “rags to riches” transformation.

Since Thursday, Williams has appeared on at least four major television programs, including morning news shows and late-night TV, recorded commercials for Kraft Foods, and been offered multiple jobs as a professional announcer. The Cleveland Cavaliers, a professional basketball team in Ohio, have offered him a permanent position. They have created a web site devoted to recruiting “the golden voice.”

A reunion between Williams and his 90-year-old mother, who he had reportedly not seen for 20 years,

was filmed by NBC and CBS and broadcast to the world. Williams’ chronic homelessness and joblessness, as well as a previous history of substance abuse, had caused him to be estranged from his family. Gaggles of reporters, photographers and media handlers ogled as the two embraced for the first time in decades late Thursday. One cameraman actually got down so close to Ted as to touch his shoulder as he knelt down, held in his mother’s arms.

According to the *Huffington Post*, both NBC and CBS were so anxious to gain exclusive rights to shoot the Williams’ family reunion that they engaged in subterfuge, ultimately preventing Ted and his mother from contacting each other until they were able to work out a deal allowing both networks to sensationalize the event.

CBS claims that on Wednesday night it brought Ted’s mother to a New York City airport to meet her son, who was flown there by NBC. According to CBS, NBC then whisked Ted off the plane before he could see her so as not to have to share the moment with its rival. NBC claims it had no knowledge Julia Williams was waiting at the airport. The two companies then spent the better part of the next day negotiating over the filming rights to the reunion.

Describing the CBS-NBC rivalry over Williams as a “fierce war,” the *Huffington Post* reports that mutual recriminations are now flying back and forth between the networks, with each claiming their actions were driven by the most noble motives. Both outlets could care less about the emotional or psychological needs of the Williams family.

The Ted Williams story, quite legitimately, has provoked significant sympathy from ordinary people, who appreciate his unique vocal gift and are disturbed that someone with such talent should be condemned to

a life of homelessness and destitution. The original video spot of Williams created by the *Dispatch* has by now garnered upwards of 13 million hits. While some right-wing media outlets have seized on the fact that Williams has a history of drug abuse and petty crime, many feel compassion for the problems this man has confronted.

But the media bonanza surrounding Williams' plight is both nauseating and hypocritical.

The giant corporations fawning over "the man with the golden voice" are manifestly indifferent to the extraordinary social suffering in the United States today and the country's growing homeless population.

Pat McManamon of the *San Francisco Chronicle* pointed out that Williams' interviewers on NBC's "Today Show," Matt Lauer and Meredith Vieira, respectively make \$13 million and \$10 million a year. "Imagine how many homeless Lauer and Vieira have passed on their way to work and not given a second glance to," he noted. The same could be said about the entire legion of major producers and executives who stand behind them.

The attention being given to Williams by the Cleveland Cavaliers is also notable. The owner of the basketball team, which plays in Quicken Loans Arena in Ohio, is the CEO of this large lending institution. As David Sirota of the *Huffington Post* pointed out, "Quicken Loans has been one of the major banks throwing people out of their homes during the foreclosure crisis." The corporation, which has posted record profits in its mortgage division since 2009, is directly responsible for the swelling of the ranks of America's homeless.

While the Cavaliers have reportedly offered to give Williams a house and pay his mortgage, the owner of the basketball team would never dream of affording such treatment to thousands of other desperate Americans who have lost their jobs and are unable to make their house payments.

In 2007, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimated that 3.5 million people experience homelessness annually in the United States. More recently, in a reflection of the impact of the economic crisis and widespread home foreclosures, the U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that the number of homeless families across 26 major cities had increased by 9 percent during 2010. In early January, the web site

Diverseeducation.com noted an increase in the population of homeless college students, as unemployed workers returning to school and cash-strapped families struggle to pay for courses that might give a chance at a future job, even though they are unable to afford housing.

There are countless instances of ordinary individuals and families facing the consequences of layoffs, unpaid medical bills, and foreclosure, which are expected to hit 1 million in 2010 alone. The mainstream media, which knows that the level of social misery in America is growing, deliberately ignores these stories and refuses to provide a genuine portrait of everyday life for masses of working people.

The story of Ted Williams is an exception because the media giants believe they can profit from showering attention on this talented individual, who they will exploit to win favor from the viewing public. The fact that Williams is a religious man and attributes his recent good fortune to god's will makes him an even more attractive candidate for the cable news networks' "human interest" story. Had Williams even mentioned the lack of government aid for the homeless or the jobless, he would have been quickly passed over.

Furthermore, Williams' new-found fame and good fortune is by no means guaranteed. Undoubtedly, after years of homelessness and a history of substance abuse, he faces a great many psychological and physical challenges. Such an individual needs sustained care, treatment, and attention—the sort of support that can be only provided by a society organized around meeting human needs, not private profit. Williams will find no genuine help in confronting these difficulties from the vultures at NBC, CBS, Kraft Foods, and the Cleveland Cavaliers. They will drop him as quickly as they picked him up. Over the course of the coming weeks and months, as Williams works to rebuild his life they will move on to the next media-fabricated bonanza and he will be left to his fate. It is not guaranteed that it will be a happy one.



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