

Bursting the bubble

A conversation with 'On the Media' host Brooke Gladstone about her new graphic novel and what she really thinks of our relationship with the news

BY AARON BURKHALTER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In 1796, London tea broker James Tilly Matthews said that criminals operated an "air loom" that controlled people through rays that travel through the air. In 1919, Freud apostle Victor Tausk met a young woman named Natalija who said an ex-suitor was hurting her through a coffin-shaped "influencing machine."

Today, we blame our own odd behavior on the media. Civic discourse losing its civility? Blame the talking heads on CNN and Fox News. Students gunning down their peers at high schools and college campuses? Must be video games. But Brooke Gladstone, host of the weekly NPR program "On The Media," rejects that idea in her graphic novel "The Influencing Machine."

As depicted by comic artist Josh Neufeld, Gladstone is shown on every page, addressing the reader face-to-cartoonish-face as she lays out her manifesto on modern media. She contends that while the media might represent a warped, funhouse mirror, it's still a telling reflection. Just as James Tilly Matthews and Natalija blamed their erratic behavior on imaginary constructions, contemporary media consumers too quickly scapegoat media outlets when they don't like the stories being told.

Gladstone wags a finger at media producers and consumers alike while splicing together centuries of history and commentary. Because every new development in media resembles an old development, she remains optimistic. We survived the advent of radio and television. We'll survive the Internet.

Aaron Burkhalter: Many NPR and public radio personalities have published books. And no doubt you could have written a traditional book on this topic. Why did you decide to work in the realm of comics?

Brooke Gladstone: A variety of reasons. One of which is that I get books all the time about the media, and they start to blend one

into the other after a while. And I didn't want to write a book that I didn't want to read. So, that was one thing. Another thing is the way that I am used to relating to people and conveying information has everything to do with radio, and I thought comics would be the closest I could get to preserving that voice. Not because I'm a comic person on the radio, but because there is a unique quality of intimacy. But radio also is unique because it's not offered in the same way (as) any other medium. And so I wanted to be able to do what I get to do on the radio, which is to talk directly to people. There's that illusion that the person is speaking directly to you on the radio. It's not something that you experience when you're reading an article or even watching a TV, when you have the sense that there are a million people tuned to the same channel. When you're listening to the radio you feel like somebody's breath is practically on your cheek. And so I wanted to be able to speak in balloons and look my reader in the eye because I was taking them on a complicated and non-chronological journey through history, right? Starting with the invention of the written word and projecting forward to the year 2045, and I didn't want to lose them along the way.

A.B.: What was the writing process like?

B.G.: It was nothing like I had ever done before. Basically the process was, I would, you know, roughly write a page, and then I would divide it up into sections. And then I would write it again with shorter and fewer words. And then I would write it a third time after I had thought up the image. In an illustrated book, the pictures support the text. But in a comic book, the pictures replace the text. It's a very dense book. You may have had that experience if you read it. There's just a lot jammed into those pages. And a big part of that has to do with the fact that I could remove context and description, because I could supply it in the image. And I



PHOTO COURTESY OF ON THE MEDIA

would write a very complicated description, maybe 200 words with three reference links from the Internet that I would send to Josh, and then maybe 35 words of actual text.

A.B.: You compare media consumers to this young woman from the early 1900s who told her psychiatrist that an ex-boyfriend had a machine that he could use to control her. Please explain how we view the media today as a controlling machine.

B.G.: The more widespread media becomes, the more it becomes part of the air we breathe, the more suspicious of it we become. A lot of that suspicion is justified. I don't pretend that the media are not biased or that they in any way reflect a true picture of the world as it is. It's a reflection in a funhouse mirror. What I was saying is that we participate in the process of making the media the way they are. They're essentially a commercial operation. If they didn't sell their image of the world, then they wouldn't continue trying to peddle it. There isn't a conspiracy, is my point. Every time there is a new technology, there is the suspicion that

it's going to change what it means to be human; that we'll lose our volition to it. And that's been going on since the beginning of science. That's why really the Patient Zero in the book is James Tilly Matthews, who ends up in the loony bin. Basically what I contend is that it's not a responsible or useful position to blame the media whenever, increasingly, it is in our own hands to change the media.

A.B.: Have you seen any recent examples where, as consumers, we have changed the media?

B.G.: Certainly the biggest headline of the last year was probably the Arab Spring, as it's been called. Much of that was largely reported in its initial stages and throughout by social media that is entirely in the hands of amateurs. And in that case you saw the limitations of official media, because the Middle East in particular is a region in which it's very difficult to maintain a free press. And you have Al Jazeera; it does a

See BUBBLE, page 9

GOING ON A

VACATION

SOON?

BOOK YOUR STAY THROUGH **HOTELS4CHANGE**

YOU SAVE. STREET ROOTS BENEFITS.

.....

(Especially if you or your business are a frequent traveller!)

Check out the Hotels4Change link on the Street Roots home page: www.streetroots.org

The Taft Home

Residential Care Community

Where senior and disabled adults receive the care and respect they deserve.

Call us for more information
(503)223-2144

1337 S.W. Washington, Portland, OR 97205
www.tafthome.org