And the people stayed home.

And they listened, and read books, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still.

And they listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed.

And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

—Kitty O’Meara, “In the Time of Pandemic,” March 16, 2020
As of the writing of this chapter, we find ourselves in trying times amidst a global pandemic. The world watches as people die of an illness hitherto unknown to humankind. As cultures decide how best to respond to the pandemic, marked differences emerge in the ways in which each nation reacts. Who knew that when the “Hot Girl Summer” of 2019 conclusively matriculated into “Studious Girl Fall,” it would be the end of so many things that our corporate media overlords had taken for granted: summer, taco trucks, bars, pool parties, Hujis, Lizzo—but of course not now, not ever, not even in an international crisis, hot girls. As the fall of 2019 eased into winter and the new year began, a pandemic began to take hold, first appearing in Wuhan, China, before rapidly spreading across the world. Hot girls, having hibernated in their winter throws, climbed out of formfitting Uniqlo turtlenecks to find TikTok fame, the perfect sourdough starter recipe, quarantine fitness tutorials, and mask fashion statements. Corporate opportunists lurked in the corner as social upheaval has rattled the globe, promoting the newest buying trends and how to rock your “quarantine chic.”

Even as millions lose their loved ones and their jobs, legacy media finds ways to monetize tragedy. By March 2020, the United States had taken multiple approaches to combating the virus, which involved major shutdowns of most institutions nationwide. The capitalist machine was forced to take a pause, and as time went on both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat have been impacted, yet late-stage capitalism memes remain potent. Class, status, and privilege are central to how the coronavirus is experienced by humankind. As soon as it became clear to
everyday Americans and their insta-famous, Tummy Tea–sporting Tinseltown avatars that this pandemic would strike the motherland of Big Macs and tornado-strength AK-47s, one urgent question rose above all others for the US corporate media: Does Costco have enough toilet paper? In the face of existential panic, Americans did what they do best—they bought in bulk.

The 24/7 news cycle followed suit, shifting from Keeping Up with the Kardashians to Keeping Up with the Joneses. Vending machines filled with personal protective equipment (PPE) were spotted in US airports. The Purge played out in every local mall and betwixt and between two-cart-apart shoppers at Trader Joe’s. Stimulus checks and meat and PPE, oh my! And as long as there are products to sell, there will always be hot girls selling them. Soon, news outlets placed their field reporters amongst empty grocery store shelves, interviewing locals who stockpiled hand sanitizer, Clorox wipes, toilet paper, and medical masks, with the intent of peddling them at marked-up prices on Amazon.

President Trump’s administration resisted national stay-at-home orders in favor of daily televised presidential press conferences, which played out as Shark Tank pitches to the American public for get-rich-quick coronavirus cure schemes. Trump treated the novel coronavirus as novelty, enlisting the corporate news media to broadcast his thoughts about injectable bleach or UV rays that he believed could cure the disease. Thus Americans stuck at home with a lifetime supply of Chex Mix get to pile on their quarantine fifteen with a steady diet of both kinds of junk food—snacks and news.

The term “Junk Food News” was coined by the late
Project Censored founder Carl Jensen in 1983 to identify how corporate media was beginning to profiteer from headline-grabbing, sensationalist news stories in lieu of traditional investigative journalism. As we’ve traded in *Singles in Your Area* for *Kraft Singles* under shelter-in-place ordinances, it has become clear how empty-calorie infotainment has replaced information. CNN town halls and BuzzFeed roundups of *The Best Memes to Get You Through Your Quaranteens* expose how the news media now values view counts over truth, and censorship over the kind of reporting essential to an effective democracy.

As we grapple with this reality and prepare to hopefully climb our way back out of a recession, we are reminded of the days post-9/11 and the propaganda that then went along with coming together as a nation. What we find that is similar to the post-9/11 reality is a capitalist society that will never stop hawking its wares in whatever shape or form possible. This conception that Americans can buy their way back to prosperity has its roots in post–World War II consumerism, but it was renewed and compounded by the Bush administration’s response to the tragedy of 9/11. The false belief that purchasing power equals stability—and the even more sinister false hope that mere assertion can overcome a mortal threat—is a phenomenon David L. Altheide addressed in an article titled “Consuming Terrorism.”

Altheide’s “Consuming Terrorism” was a sociological analysis of the ways that the corporate news media, the Bush administration, and the financial markets propagated the message that Americans should use their money to showcase their patriotism and refute terrorism. Just as soup cans, hand sanitizers, and toilet paper stocks were
sold out at the big-box chains in the spring of 2020, American flags sold out in October 2001. This strategy ascribed to grief a dollar amount, the same price as a brand-new flat-screen TV and surround-sound speaker set that could play “America the Beautiful.”

This buy-back-your-freedom model has arisen again, now out of the desperation of the coronavirus pandemic, in which the lower and middle classes, most affected by the tragedies of the crisis, are the most pressured to reopen and re-conform to the economic systems that oppress them. While buying American was once promoted as the way to defeat the terrorists, in the time of COVID-19, toilet paper seems to be the new favored commodity in wiping out the bad guys. Witness as the corporate media dare to ask the truly hard-hitting questions: If we hoard the Charmin, does that make us good or bad Americans? In many ways the corporate media allowed the government to use the 9/11 crisis as a way to instill fear to more easily institute restrictive policies that not only reduced our freedoms but invaded our privacy. As we remain mid-pandemic, we can only wonder what is still to come of the virus and the government’s halfhearted attempts to contain it, as well as what types of policies are being quietly put in place as we all focus in on the continuing crisis that is Junk Food News.

THE CLASSIC CASE OF CLASS AND ACCESS CORONA-FIED

The beginning months of 2020 saw the proliferation of COVID-19 all across the globe, manifesting in at least 185 countries and territories. With cases climbing past
five million infections into the summer of 2020, people throughout the world were confined to their homes under strict quarantine orders. This fundamental shift of the status quo was brought on in merely a few months. In December 2019 China informed the World Health Organization that they were experiencing several cases of pneumonia from an unknown cause throughout the city of Wuhan. On January 7, 2020, the new virus was identified and isolated, and on January 11 China reported the first death from the new coronavirus. From there the novel coronavirus continued to spread, baffling scientists and doctors alike with its unique blend of symptoms and fluctuating infection rates while effectively inducing mass hysteria, fear, and uncertainty.

By early May of 2020, the pandemic had spread to millions and the United States had joined the international community in enforcing shelter-in-place orders. With almost everyone bound to their homes, Netflix, TikToks, and Twitter feeds, fearmongering news alerts or celebrity-groveling updates became the pinnacle of pandemic content. The corporate press showcased quarantining and coronavirus-diagnosed celebrities, with selfies from Hollywood’s finest and star-studded lip sync battles, each message underlining the importance of staying at home while the self-appointed messengers basked in the sun beaming down on the poolside chairs of their Calabasas mansions. While celebrities spread messages that “we’re all getting through this together” and that these are “uncertain times,” their only uncertainties lie in whether their local Whole Foods will be restocked with vegan toilet paper. In the meantime, Americans reckon with how quarantine has impacted their careers, home lives, and
The corporate media is actively and consistently choosing to focus on the famed icons who are still able to share their lived perfection even during times of hardship. Slide open the phone or turn on the TV and what do we see? We gape at Arnold Schwarzenegger getting comfy with his two miniature horses, Selena Gomez adopting a puppy, and Tom Hanks and his wife Rita Wilson on the front cover of practically every tabloid magazine after they tested positive for COVID-19.

On March 17 even Al Jazeera was guilty of celebs-gone-viral trending, publishing a continuously-updated article that included all the names of infected celebrities and those in power, as if it were vital for civilians to be aware of which rich and famous people have been infected. What would we do if we didn’t know which Hollywood stars to write “get well soon” notes to? Because we surely need to focus our attention on those lucky few with access to testing just because they thought they were exposed—and have their fourth home in the country to retreat to when times get tough. It has left us questioning: Who is considered important and worthy of coverage during this pandemic? On March 23, USA Today wrote a headlining article under their National Basketball Association (NBA) section: “Charles Barkley says he tested negative for coronavirus.” Congratulations, Charles! Phoning in to the show Inside the NBA broadcast on TNT earlier that month, Barkley had said, “I haven’t been feeling great and they didn’t want me to take any chances.” Thank goodness for USA Today notifying us of Mr. Barkley’s reasoning behind getting tested, and his good news! It’s obviously of utmost importance for us to be aware of which celebrities have been tested, and their results. Since they’re superior finances.
to us all and good at sports it’s naturally also vital that they receive immediate testing. In the eyes of the corporate media, celebrity culture is the perfect justification for social Darwinism when it comes to access to healthcare treatment. That same week, Sean Turner, who’s considered a mere “regular person,” was spending her tenth day in hospital isolation with no test kits, so her symptoms were being treated as they appeared. It seems like Sean should’ve been better at sports or had millions of listeners on Spotify if she wanted to be tested.

This pandemic has taken its toll on every American, but middle-class and lower-income families are the ones struggling the most. The New York Times published an article about how families were already facing financial hardships in a “good” economy before the crisis, and how, with the arrival of the pandemic, these struggles have skyrocketed. The newly-unemployed are quick to file for benefits, lines are stretching for miles at food pantries, and tenants are pleading to landlords for extensions on rent, just as homeowners are beseeching bankers to grant extensions on mortgage payments. By the last week of May 2020, unemployment claims surpassed 38 million. That is more than twice the amount of jobs that were created in the decade since the 2008 recession. It certainly shows the hardship our country is facing.

It’s fair to say that we won’t be running into Arnold Schwarzenegger or Selena Gomez at any food pantry, even as many Americans rely on such services to make ends meet. For example, in Monmouth and Ocean Counties in New Jersey, one food pantry has seen a 40 percent spike in people accessing their services, serving 364,000 additional meals in April 2020. Perhaps the media
should begin to focus more on the experience of everyday Americans instead of letting us know that CNN anchor Chris Cuomo is “feeling well.” Those who are famous are not more important than those who are not. We are all suffering one way or another, and we would do well to shine a light on those who are facing more obstacles than those who are rich and powerful. Perhaps then those Zoom galas our media is covering in all their spectacular emptiness could be focused on and targeted to benefit the people without all the things celebrities take for granted, and we could take a step toward equity. Just an idea.

**MISMANAGED MEDIA MOURNS MAMBA, MEANWHILE MISINFORMED MASSES MISS MISSILES**

At the end of January 2020, the heartbreaking loss of legendary NBA player Kobe Bryant, known to fans by his self-chosen nickname “The Black Mamba,” dominated the news cycle all over the world. Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna were killed tragically alongside several others in a helicopter crash just outside of Los Angeles while they were en route to a game Gianna would have played in, with Kobe coaching. The day following the accident, Kobe’s and Gianna’s names were plastered across the front pages of 23 newspapers worldwide. During the weeks that followed Kobe Bryant’s death, people around the world continued to follow the story while mourning his loss. While a few media outlets covered the deaths with a measure of dignity, affording Bryant’s grieving family and friends some privacy, there was overall a basic lack of human decency, stemming from the majorly com-
petitive nature of the media that is fueled by the demands of everyday consumers. In the slew of articles and video reports devoted to Bryant, valorization became practically the only acceptable tone to take, ensuring little acknowledgment of any of the less-than-admirable parts of his life, such as the sexual assault accusation and charge against him from 2003. Disregarding his controversial past and commemorating him as a hero, the media managed to profit off his death for weeks by sensationalizing him and his illustrious career. For weeks, social media was a blur of purple and gold—the colors of the basketball team Bryant played for, the Los Angeles Lakers—as people voiced their love and support for the Bryant family, and appreciation for Kobe’s impact on the sports world. The coverage of the tragedy was extensive, insensitive, and by the end a major distraction from other significant world events.

A few weeks prior to Kobe Bryant’s death, news broke that President Trump ordered a drone strike that killed ten people, including the intended target, Iranian general Qasem Soleimani. In the days following the strike, Iran retaliated by attacking two American bases in Iraq. Fortunately, no one was killed and initial reports indicated there were no injuries. Then on January 24, 2020, the Pentagon released a statement saying 34 troops were diagnosed as having sustained traumatic brain injuries from the attack. Those numbers were updated five times, with the number of casualties increasing with each update in the weeks that followed. While Trump and his administration claimed that the initial attack against Soleimani was necessary, their reasoning was anything but clear. They struggled to explain their rationale and justify their abrupt and brutal decision to launch a missile strike against Soleimani and nearby Ira-
nian and Iraqi soldiers. Trump’s hubris evidently led him to make a judgment that ended lives, and changed other lives forever. The Trump administration’s inability to stick to a story indicates their own misunderstanding of the incident and its consequences. While it is concerning that our current administration still cannot articulate their reasoning, it is also deeply concerning that this story did not get more critical coverage in the mass media. As the number of injuries from the retaliatory attack increased, the data was left unchallenged and more or less unacknowledged by the corporate media while they fixated on the loss of Kobe Bryant. Rather than focus on the regular people caught in the crossfire of state violence, they were focused on the profitability of an accidental celebrity death.

By February 11, updated reports revealed that more than one hundred American troops suffered from brain injuries as a result of Iran’s retaliatory attack. The corporate media neglected to mention that the troops who were injured were only stationed at the targeted Iraqi bases as a precaution following the killings that Trump ordered. While many of the injured troops have since returned to duty, those who were injured will need to be monitored for the rest of their lives. Though a traumatic brain injury can, depending on the severity, have long-term effects or even cause death, when these brain injuries were mentioned in the corporate news, they were brushed off as being very minor. While there was coverage of these strikes, it was not reported on critically or promptly, typical of the corporate media’s focus on headline-grabbing stories in lieu of reporting the news with integrity. Additionally, the strike and its consequences are illustrative of the lack of honor and foresight within the current administration.
Without public awareness of the problems our country is facing, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for change or resolution. While we still have not seen any public appreciation for the sacrifice of the US soldiers injured in the attacks, the “Celebration of Life” memorial for Kobe and Gianna Bryant sold out the entire Staples Center. Now, here we might ask ourselves, had those soldiers died at those bases, would they be commemorated as heroes? Would the media cover any soldier’s death as extensively as they did an NBA star’s? The answer is plainly no—unless the media regarded such coverage as useful in stirring up support for a new war. This disservice to troops wounded in service of the United States demonstrates how the corporate media sensationalizes the US military in action, but abandons any commitment to them once they return home as veterans. When they cease to be mere symbols and appear as real people with real struggles, they are disregarded by the governmental and media systems that once glorified them.

The media, while historically profiting off of the tragic loss of such public figures as Princess Diana or Michael Jackson, does not profit when they honestly report on the shortcomings of the bodies that govern them. Stories like Kobe Bryant’s will continue to dominate news cycles because they focus our sad and negative feelings on topics we have no control over, instead of allowing us to see the greater issues happening in the world that we could come together to change.
COUNTING THE DEAD, SNAKE OIL, AND FORGOTTEN FIRST PEOPLES

Every day, the death tolls and confirmed cases of COVID-19 pass another landmark, a total beyond those who died in 9/11 or US soldiers who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. Even while addressing important information on infection rates, the corporate news media find a way to undermine the severity of this global health crisis, generating a sense of nationwide loss and hopelessness that inevitably can only be dispelled by having Americans turn out their wallets.

If you’ve been self-quarantining like a good citizen, you’ve probably tuned in to your local corporate news source and seen just how fond news channels and websites are of discussing the death toll in great detail. In the masked face of this pandemic, we see the corporate news media once again manipulating the grief of many Americans by sensationalizing the tragedies of the crisis. In the summer of 2020 one could tune in to any news station and know that within minutes they were sure to mention the words “death toll” or “confirmed cases.” Morbid charts of lives lost and estimated body counts, with stock market–like speculations on what the final numbers will be, flood the various news sources and leave the average media consumer in a state of paralysis. While the death toll is daunting, its coverage on corporate media is akin to that of the coverage of 9/11, which similarly sensationalized tragedy, traumatizing viewers through the unremitting repetition of grim imagery and leaving no room for any solace from grief.

With a recession on the horizon, it will be the essen-
tional workers, who risk their lives to potential infection by a deadly virus, who will be thrust into a jobless environment for months. Yet just as in the aftermath of 9/11, the frenzied coverage is hyper-focused on the idea that by spending money we will prevail over a pandemic, as if COVID-19 was yet another war to throw money at. This, coupled with false claims about potential ways to prevent or test for the virus, leaves us all feeling a bit fearful and confused, looking for guidance. Unfortunately, there is no solid guidance to be found from those who were charged with the job of guiding. The president of the United States suggests we inject disinfectant or take hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug as of yet unproven to help, blithely telling us to “try it if you like,” as he has. With such a vacuum of authoritative guidance or coordinated national strategy, many Americans flock to the unregulated hucksters littering the internet with ads purporting to have reliable test kits or potential cures. We are living in the wild, wild west of virus prevention and treatment and there seems to be no end in sight.

This undue focus on the exact number of people dead from the virus and the associated selling of snake oil effectively obscures the deeper issue of who is dying and why. For instance, while corporate news correspondents bicker about projected cures and body counts, five million self-identified American Indians and Alaskan Natives are suffering at a disproportionately higher rate than most. The first people to inhabit this continent are turning out to be among the most vulnerable to the coronavirus. This should come as no surprise, as Indigenous Americans are some of the most economically disadvantaged populations in the country. Poverty, limited access to healthcare,
densely populated households, and comorbid conditions all place this community at greater risk than the vast majority of the US populace. Experts say that entire tribes could be wiped out due to the pandemic, as households in close proximity to one another create an opportune environment for the virus to spread quickly.\textsuperscript{28} Suggested social distancing protocol is more difficult to enforce in extended family households, which are more common among Indigenous Americans.

In addition, Native American populations have some of the country’s highest rates of hypertension, asthma, cancer, and heart and cardiovascular disease—all of which put them at higher than average risk of dying from the virus. The novel coronavirus’s slow slaughter of Indigenous peoples and the corporate media’s indifference to their plight is reminiscent of when entire tribes were infected with smallpox during the Trail of Tears, the forced mass exodus of Native Americans from their southeastern homelands to areas west of the Mississippi River in the mid-19th century. Native Americans have a long and complicated history regarding disease; they are 600 times more likely to die of tuberculosis and close to 200 times more likely to die of diabetes than any other group in the United States.\textsuperscript{29} The federal government historically has done little to protect these tribes, as Native American communities are often the last to receive healthcare funding. The current handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is more of the same. Speaking for the Oglala Sioux Tribe in South Dakota, President Julian Bear Runner said the federal Indian Health Service facilities “are not well equipped.” There are 50,000 members of the tribe, yet there are only 24 coronavirus test kits, six ventilators, and four beds
reserved for quarantine at the reservation’s Pine Ridge Hospital. So far, there is limited data on the number of people infected with coronavirus in Native American communities, yet the data that have been collected make it very clear that they are at very high risk.

Indigenous communities could be decimated if steps are not taken immediately to provide adequate treatment, support, and resources. Small strides have been made, and there has been marginal coverage of these developments in corporate media. For instance, the University of California, San Francisco has taken the initiative of sending a small team of doctors and nurses to serve in the Navajo Nation. Yet while the opportunity exists to shine a spotlight on the urgent need to reach hard-hit Native communities before it is too late, we are presented with the “death clock,” presidential suggestions that we try ingesting bleach, and encouragements to go deeper and deeper in debt in order to be good Americans. Though Native Americans are this country’s first inhabitants, they tend to be last on the list of concerns among the corporate media.

CONCLUSION

The year 2020 gave way to a new kind of summer, with sweatpants tan lines, Zoom pool parties, letter writing, and swapping Spotify playlists, as millions of Americans quarantined indoors—practically everywhere but in the state of Wisconsin. As Americans settle into the uncertain norms of the future, the events of the year before our lean, mean quaranteens feel like distant memories, daydreams of crowded bars, and petty office gossip. While in the eyes
of the corporate press, coronavirus defined the discourse of 2020, it wasn’t the only bingeable Junk Food snack of the 2019–2020 news cycle, but it certainly felt that way. News reports focusing on climate change, human rights, and geopolitics were eclipsed by the onslaught of coronavirus content. Even as cases soared in late April, the Trump administration furthered its efforts into creating a military base on Greenland in the hopes of accessing the abundance of natural resources that lie beneath indigenous soil. Yet a story that would likely have constituted a career-ending imperial fumble in other times or administrations barely lasted one day’s corporate news cycle during the pandemic.32

As nations throughout the world were struggling against more than 4.5 million coronavirus cases, the year-and-a-half-long Israeli elections concluded in mid-May, with a unity government between Benjamin Netanyahu and the opposition party leader, Benny Gantz. Netanyahu was sworn into office and will remain for eighteen months, in an agreement that threatens the annexation of the West Bank. Prime Minister Netanyahu is scheduled to bring the Trump administration’s “vision for peace,” rejected as clearly biased and dangerous by Palestinian leaders, before his cabinet in July. Yet the violent, discriminatory, Far-Right policies enforced by Israel’s longest-serving prime minister, the serious corruption charges he faces, and the un concealed cronyism between him and Trump (who appears on Netanyahu’s reelection billboards, and whom Netanyahu has proposed naming an illegal settlement after) seemed to draw less attention in the corporate press than the manner in which the coronavirus crisis boosted his reelection campaign.33
As cities and regions throughout the United States began flirting with plans to lift quarantine orders, a major victory in the Keystone Pipeline protest movement was achieved when a federal judge in Montana revoked a Keystone XL building permit, demanding that an environmental report of the impact of the pipeline must be sufficiently completed before construction. It constituted a small sliver of good news in a year in which tragedy was commercialized, GIF-ed, and memed into oblivion, though as the news came just after Trump announced he would suspend the US government’s funding for the World Health Organization, it was left virtually untouched by the corporate press.

In the wake of the suffering, heartbreak, and loss due to the coronavirus, American families turned to social media to spread good news. Family-made TikToks and baking Instagram stories were the perfect antidotes to our stay-at-home diets of Junk Food dysphoria. However, a craving to return to normalcy underpinned all these messages of perseverance. Social media is rife with posts that lust after the days in which people could go out to bars, restaurants, clubs, and malls, fueling the narrative that our return to normalcy should be a return to mindless spending.

While Junk Food reportage will likely increase and the commercial feedback loop return as the world re-emerges from lockdown, there is currently an opportunity to reflect on the economic and social systems that led to this pandemic—the kind of opportunity envisioned in Kitty O’Meara’s poem that serves as this chapter’s epigraph, where, on looking back, we could say that “the people began to think differently. And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous,
and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.” If we do not embrace that opportunity for change right now, during the heart of the crisis, those familiar Junk Food messages are sure to return: that people can replace their fears and loss with a new set of wheels, or simply buy back “Hot Girl Summer,” as though Americans could consume their way out of the current crisis—only to be as uninformed and unprepared in facing the next.

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Notes


15. Margaret Sullivan, “Media Coverage of Kobe Bryant’s Death was a Chaotic Mess, but There were Moments of Grace,” Washington Post, January 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/media-coverage-of-kobe-bryants-death-was-a-chaotic-mess-but-there-were-moments-of-grace/2020/01/27/d825ade4-4106-11ea-a6a-a0830db3ed8_story.html.


23. Ibid.; and Altheide, “Consuming Terrorism.”


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.


