CHAPTER 3

TikToking Our Return to a New Normalcy

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America’s present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy.
—WARREN G. HARDING, Boston, May 1920

I’m sure y’all got a story to tell.
—JOHN REINKE, from the Netflix series Tiger King

From social distancing to Zoom fatigue, Americans dove headfirst into the “new normal” of 2020–2021. Confined to their homes due to COVID-19, the seemingly unending global pandemic, many Americans struggled to make ends meet and stay healthy, but also searched for new ways to entertain and distract themselves, turning to a plethora of media outlets. Once reliant on newspapers, magazines, books, and corporate television news networks, Americans
instead turned to apps and other online streaming services on their phones and tablets to access the outside world, and especially to binge-watch epic distractions both low brow and high: from the murder, mayhem, and madness of *Tiger King* to the banal, bourgeois, bedroom battles of *Bridgerton*. Of course, many also flocked in droves to social media for daily contact and communication, and for news about the pandemic, but it wasn’t just the posts on Facebook or even the 280-character-limited tweets on Twitter that kept Americans up-to-date—it was also the ever-expanding rabbit hole of TikTok. Indeed, as John Reinke noted on the smash reality TV series *Tiger King*, everyone’s “got a story to tell,” and they were certainly telling on apps like TikTok, where Andy Warhol’s old adage that one day everyone will be famous for 15 minutes was edited down to about 15 seconds, or a generous minute.

TikTok is basically Twitter on street-grade crack. According to a *Forbes* interview with University of Southern California Professor Julie Albright, TikTok has “adopted the same principles that have made gambling addictive.” A digital drug for anyone with a phone, and especially young people, the TikTok app uses random reinforcement—similar to a slot machine on the Las Vegas strip—to keep users scrolling. It has changed the way Americans tell and view stories, interact with others, and even receive news and information. Its influence borders on the obscene. TikTok has become part of the new normal of the past year, but instead of helping us heal, it has functioned as a nostrum to the new normal—a rather ineffective remedy from an unqualified source during the pandemic.

TikTok feeds Americans nonstop Junk Food News
and infotainment, à la reality TV. “Junk Food News” is a term, originally coined by Project Censored’s founder Carl Jensen, to identify a category of frivolous or inconsequential news stories that receive substantial coverage by corporate news outlets, thus distracting news audiences from other, more significant stories. Content appearing on TikTok definitely fits Jensen’s Junk Food News descriptor, as the app has become so popular that many of its brief videos regularly appear on corporate news media outlets, distracting Americans from crucial independent investigative reporting.

This chapter aims to shed light on the mass media malaise this past year that distracted Americans from far more significant news stories. While a young woman inadvisably sprayed her hair with industrial glue instead of hairspray on TikTok, Americans were glued to their own hyper-partisan and biased news sources, deprived of any reporting on urgent humanitarian crises and food shortages in places like Ethiopia, Yemen, and beyond. As Fox News devoted hours to displaying its disgust of Cardi B and her wildly popular song “WAP,” statistics regarding female unemployment and a decrease in living standards for American women were thrown out the window. As Americans were swept up in the vicarious power of cancel culture, celebrating “canceled” celebrity YouTube stars, reality TV hosts, and the British royal family, bills erecting new barriers to voting that would disproportionately impact voters from historically marginalized groups—in effect, canceling their votes—went mostly unseen on corporate news media outlets. Finally, the love Americans feel for professional sports seems to have been eclipsed over the past few years by their love for reality TV glimpses of
athletes’ behind-the-scenes shenanigans; by the profusion of corporate news fluff, one might imagine that audiences today enjoy watching athletes fail off the court with crazy antics and bad behavior more than their triumphs during the games. Yet even in the midst of this tomfoolery tsunami, the real sporting scandal of the past year was the underreporting of the obscene profits franchise owners made while many of their supportive employees suffered during the pandemic.

All of these Junk Food News stories, and others like them, can be found on cable news and in the corporate press, now supersized via social media sites such as Twitter and Big Tech apps like TikTok. It’s more than most can possibly keep up with—especially after doggedly “Keeping Up with the Kardashians” after 20 years . . . and now Kimye’s divorce!

After more than a year of social isolation due to the pandemic, Americans are now eager—just like their historical counterparts of one hundred years ago—to return to “normalcy,” as a then soon-to-be president Warren G. Harding put it. But, like the Americans of the 1920s who were emerging from a World War and global pandemic, we’re likely to find such a return to normalcy nearly impossible to achieve given how much has changed. This year’s top Junk Food News selections not only reflect this “new normal,” but also survey the best of the worst, the stories you didn’t necessarily want or need to know about but couldn’t unsee, served fresh, and endlessly refreshed, off corporate news media’s marvelous menu of mundane mediocrity.
TIKTOK TIME BOMB—ALGORITHMS OF HUMILITAINMENT

We’ve all seen them: the teenagers and young adults doing synchronized dancing in a grocery store, park, mall, or coffee shop. You may have heard them duetting sea-shanties, or maybe you were told about the crowdsourced musical based off of the 2007 Pixar movie *Ratatouille.* All of these terribly essential activities have one thing, or specifically one app, in common: TikTok, where apparently anyone can cook!

Haven’t heard of it? Many people’s first exposure to the app may have been through Nathan Apodaca and his Ocean Spray TikTok post, vibin’ to Fleetwood Mac’s “Dreams,” riding NFTs (nonfungible tokens) to blockchain authenticity (if anyone understands what that means). Apodaca’s clip drew the attention of a TV show host excited to “sit down and tap into the mind of Nathan Apodaca, also known as ‘Dogg Face.’” It also brought him a hefty wad of cash.

Those who *still* weren’t privy to TikTok, even in the advent of these cultural milestones, most certainly became aware of its existence due to the glorious mishaps of Tes-sica Brown, also fondly known as “Gorilla Glue Girl.” Her story took the internet, tabloids, and news cycles by storm after she repeatedly posted to TikTok in the early months of 2021 that it had been a “bad, bad, bad idea” for her to use Gorilla Glue to set her hairstyle when she had run out of her regular hairspray. Her entranced audience collectively wondered, how could anyone ever make that mistake in the first place? The meme became a well-recognized source of humor, demonstrated by a *Saturday Night
Live skit titled “Gorilla Glue.” For many, it appeared as another instance of finding amusement in someone else’s humiliation. The internet is filled with videos in the so-called “fail” genre, including the slew of epic fails featured at FailArmy, Newsflare, and Funny Vines, sites and YouTube channels that all showcase their own Fails of the Week. Even ESPN’s SportsCenter boasts a “Not Top 10” segment, which pokes fun at athletes’ mishaps caught on camera. There is no shortage of “entertainment” that comes at the expense of others’ misfortunes.

The specific term for this phenomenon is “humilitainment,” a word coined by media scholars Brad Waite and Sara Booker in 2005 to refer to entertainment that capitalizes on someone else’s humiliation. This term is often used in conjunction with “schadenfreude,” a German compound word that translates to “harm-joy” and describes finding joy in others’ pain. Humilitainment often features as Junk Food News. It has become a common theme in “reality” television programming over the years, on shows like Survivor, Big Brother, 16 and Pregnant, 90 Day Fiancé, and Jersey Shore, just to name a few. Even decades-old TV series, dating back to Candid Camera and America’s Funniest Home Videos, have presented “fails” that resulted in viewers literally laughing at a complete stranger’s pain or misfortune.

From one screen to another, it’s not just television that gives us humilitainment, but our phones and tablets as well. The viral videos of people failing at trends, poorly cutting their hair at home, or having fashion faux pas in public have been on the internet and our phones almost as soon as videos could be uploaded and watched. This trend certainly hasn’t stopped, and it continues to weasel its way
into our media feeds. TikTok is just the latest vehicle for consumers to binge on Junk Food News, infotainment, and humilitainment. But perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of TikTok is its algorithm: the more time a user spends on the app, the more data the algorithm collects. For the first few uses of the app, the algorithm will present the most popular videos and trends to the user, but eventually, after tracking the user’s viewing habits, it will funnel the newcomer deeper into the app toward what the program assumes the consumer enjoys. Eventually, the user will only be recommended to very specific creators or videos that fit into the individual’s established interests.

In this way, TikTok closely resembles the corporate press. TikTok’s algorithm divides viewers into specific groups, much as corporate media news outlets like Fox News and CNN divide and conquer audiences. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, there are consistent ideological divides between groups of Americans based on where they go to get their news about what is going on in the world. In other words, the Gorilla Glue story wasn’t the only one people were getting stuck to: many Americans also like to get stuck to particular news outlets, where they can tune in to their favorite sources to feed their political confirmation biases.

This market-driven division impacts the information that spreads among various demographics in society, which in turn is reflected across social media—creating an echo chamber of poorly informed people and often resulting in the mass circulation of half-truths and misinformation. In many cases, one person’s (or niche group’s) truth is another’s fiction, yet another way in which TikTok’s algorithm produces results similar to the corporate
As with the subjects of talk shows, reality TV, or sensationalist news stories, most TikTokers who produce content are average individuals who gain notoriety for dubious reasons, which can then be further exploited by the commercial press for ratings. And much like Fox News, MSNBC, or CNN, TikTok specially tailors its information to fit the narrative of a specific audience, and the corporate media outlets seem to have developed a symbiotic relationship with the app. Thus, not only do TikTok videos now count as news, but both corporate news stories and TikTok videos, whether accurate or not, have adapted to stick with audiences eager to have their beliefs reinforced. In this regard, TikTok and the corporate media are a match made in Junk Food News heaven. What could possibly go wrong?

While Americans were stuck on Gorilla Glue Girl online, corporate news outlets stove-piped the same stories, reinforcing information silos and creating filter bubbles as monetized coping mechanisms for chaotic and uncertain times. These Junk Food News stories distracted Americans while millions of people literally starved across the globe. Democracy Now!, quoting the World Food Programme’s David Beasley, reported that Yemen, Ethiopia, and other impoverished and war-torn nations are “heading toward ‘the biggest famine in modern history,’ and many parts of [these countries] feel like ‘hell on Earth’ after years of food shortages and destruction brought on by the U.S.-backed, Saudi-led war.”

Why did that story not appear at the forefront of the corporate press, nor on the videos of TikTok? It is likely because Americans would rather bask in the glory of someone’s humilitainment than recognize worldwide
humanitarian issues. While millions of TikTok users post elements of their daily lives on an app for entertainment, the everyday reality of food shortages and starvation goes unreported. But then again, why would people want their news coverage to be civically driven when it could be viral and funny, especially when it comes at someone else’s expense?

TUCKER CARLSON HATES WET A** PU*SIES: CARDI B’S “WAP”

By practicing the fine art of raining on conservatives’ parade, Cardi B’s hit song “WAP,” featuring Megan Thee Stallion, created its own news cycle for more than nine months following its August 2020 release. Cardi B released the song “WAP,” an acronym for “Wet A** Pu*s*y,” on August 7, 2020 alongside the song’s official music video, gaining the full attention of NBC, CNN, the Washington Post, BBC, Forbes, and the New York Times in their culture, entertainment, music, and opinion sections. From pu*s*y medium-rare to pu*s*y rarely dropped from the establishment news cycle, what was once considered the purview of gossip rags like TMZ or Perez Hilton’s blog is now unfufilling fodder for even the most “serious” of publications.

Much of the positive press distributed immediately after the song’s release praised the song and video for their empowering contributions to sex-positive feminism, citing historical precedents for this hyper-sexual, feminine artistic expression in music from the 1990s. A few sources went considerably further back in American social history, comparing Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion to Black female artists from one hundred years ago like Ma
Rainey, Lucille Bogan, and Bessie Smith, all criticized in their time professionally for expressions of female sexuality and pleasure. The “WAP” song and video welcomed in important conversations across major news outlets on topics like sexuality, body positivity, feminism, intersectionality, and misogyny and misogynoir.

Possibly the most representative and accepted of our society’s white, male misogynists, Fox News host Tucker Carlson first became fixated on Cardi B’s “Wet A*s Pu*sy” just after its release; Carlson carved time from his August 18, 2020 show to skewer Cardi B and her song. In his three-minute pearl-clutching rant on Tucker Carlson Tonight, Carlson took aim at Cardi B’s lyrics, musical talent, moral values, and political engagement. He lambasted an interview Cardi B conducted for her social media followers with then–presidential hopeful Joe Biden. Carlson explained his intense (almost irrational) anger over the lyrics of “WAP.” He even excoriated Cardi B on a personal level, taking aim at the artist over a video clip in which she spoke candidly, humorously, and explicitly about vaginal health.

Not to say that this was out of character for Carlson; when audio recordings published on October 7, 2016 showed man’s-man Donald Trump unapologetically using the word “pu*sy” to describe where, as a star, he could grab a woman, Carlson did concede that Trump’s “words are indefensible”—though in that case, Carlson quickly followed up by claiming the outrage over the recordings was “manufactured,” as “the press has no moral standing to judge anyone who talks like this.” For Cardi B, though, Carlson somehow seemed not quite so magnanimous, pulling instead from his fear-mongering playbook to
decry the song as dangerous and Cardi B as the single biggest threat to American family values today.

Between August 2020 and April 2021, entertainment, business, and culture sections of news outlets sought to analyze, perhaps thanks to conservative men like Tucker Carlson, the deeper social and psychological issues at work behind this strong aversion to WAP and other expressions of female sexual pleasure. Like Carlson, Republican politician James P. Bradley condemned Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion as “what happens when children are raised without God.”8 Because children raised with God are all loving, caring creatures who do no harm to anyone, right? (Perhaps Bradley should run that by Robert Aaron Long, the 21-year-old shooter in the Atlanta spa shooting spree that left eight people dead, most of them Asian women, who claimed he “loved God and guns”).19 Month after month, there was never a shortage of headlines, opinion pieces, and social media memes about “sexually repressed” Republican men becoming “hot and bothered” by “WAP” and its accompanying video.20

Months later, in March 2021, “Wet A*s Pu*sy” was once again at the forefront of Carlson’s mind after Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s performance of the song at the Grammy Awards show. Carlson was joined on Tucker Carlson Tonight by conservative personality Candace Owens, and together they grumbled about the unfairness of life in a society that “canceled” Dr. Seuss and Mr. Potato Head but allows Cardi B to continue to make music and speak in public.21 After taking swipes at Cardi B, once again, as a mother, artist, and popular figure, Carlson and Owens ended with a condemnation of Cardi B and “WAP” for causing harm to children and families.
One further hopes those children and families were not watching Carlson’s show, lest they be even more scarred from such self-serving, degrading propaganda.

As an honorary voice of the nation’s incels, Carlson was not alone in keeping “WAP” and its Grammy performance in the news cycle. A United States congressman from Wisconsin, Glenn Grothman, drew media attention after taking to the House floor on April 22, more than a month after Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion’s Grammy performance, to criticize the Federal Communications Commission’s minimalist response to their infamous awards show appearance. Cardi B made the Politics section of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* when she struck back at Representative Grothman over his preoccupation with her performance only two days after the conviction of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. Unlike Representative Grothman, Cardi B knows the difference between Junk Food distraction and substantive, relevant news.

Overwhelmingly, those who criticized “WAP” did so from within the righteous realms of family values and child welfare. A few criticized the song as being harmful to women, feminism, and even women’s rights, implicitly. While it could take decades to study the ‘traumatizing’ impact of “WAP” on children or the detrimental effects on women’s equality, there were news stories of urgent relevance to the lives of women and children that were completely ignored by corporate, establishment news outlets, including by every woman and child’s savior, the chivalrous Tucker Carlson.

The same media voices and publications that exploited any living, breathing news about Cardi B and Megan Thee
Stallion as the harbingers of our decline conveniently forgot to cover the nationwide shutdown of childcare centers, which heavily contributed to a vast increase in unemployment among women. Some economists have used the term “shecession” for the tendency brought to a head by the pandemic, noting that the 2020 recession saw women’s unemployment rates rise far more dramatically than men’s.24

Less than two weeks before Tucker Carlson’s original diatribe against Cardi B and “WAP,” on August 6, 2020, the Hechinger Report published a piece about the accelerated threat of mass evictions caused by the COVID-19 crisis in cities such as Kansas City, Missouri. Central to coverage by the Hechinger Report, an independent news source with a focus on topics in education, was the distressing, negative impact that evictions would have on Kansas City Public Schools. A researcher with Princeton University’s Eviction Lab warned that, without protections or relief, the imminent wave of evictions would mean a disruption in even remote learning for many students, a concern shared by Melissa Douglas, a liaison for homeless students in Kansas City Public Schools.25

Why did this report on the actual welfare, health, and education of children get buried in the news cycle under the numerous other stories about Pied Piper Cardi B and the imagined moral threat she poses against children? Why did condemnations of Cardi B’s motherhood, femininity, and feminism dominate the news cycle over stories about skyrocketing women’s unemployment, the looming risk of eviction, and more deeply rooted issues like women’s access to employment and childcare? Because Junk Food News rules the news cycle.
So it is that “WAP” continues to get media coverage whenever celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow, BLACK-PINK’s Rosé, Kim Kardashian, and Addison Rae show their support for the song in the form of TikTok dance “challenges.” “WAP” returns to the news cycle whenever politicians choose to step up to Cardi B on Twitter. And “WAP” lives rent-free even in the minds of those raring to evict some 19 to 23 million Americans, including millions of schoolchildren, in the wake of the pandemic. It’s almost enough to make you wonder whether politicians and pundits denouncing the purported threat posed by a pop song might not be simply distracting us from actual crises they don’t want to address.

“I CAN’T GIVE YOU THIS ROSE”: CANCEL CULTURE MEETS THE BACHELOR FRANCHISE

Once beloved 20th-century children’s author Dr. Seuss supposedly penned the phrase, “Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter and those who matter don’t mind.” Today, however, in 21st-century America, you must never fail to mind what you say, do, or think, especially if it has a chance of ending up on the internet. Now, it seems, there is no escaping the modern threat of being “canceled”—a dreaded fate that some conservative pundits have argued Dr. Seuss himself has suffered after his own estate said it was pulling several Seuss titles from future circulation due to evolving attitudes. “Cancel culture,” as it has become known, is the phenomenon of promoting the censorship of people, brands, and even shows and movies due to what some consider to be offensive or problematic remarks, actions,
Anyone can be “canceled,” but it has become a particularly prominent practice among celebrities, authors, and politicians. In 2021 it has become the new normal to be canceled—from TikTok’s biggest stars to the face of long-running television franchises like ABC’s *The Bachelor*.

The internet has played a big part in enabling cancel culture: while the internet has revolutionized how we access information, it has also become an immortal safe, storing information and past ideas that many would rather forget. In addition, while the internet makes readily available information from the past, it does so often without context, leaving many to view the remnants of yesteryear through the lens of today’s mores. This has resulted in classic animated Disney and Warner Brothers children’s characters, including Dumbo, Peter Pan, the Aristocats, and Pepé Le Pew, being called out on the internet, especially on social media platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Facebook.

In the midst of this cancel culture phenomenon, Disney Parks even announced that its classic Disneyland ride “Splash Mountain” would be “re-themed” to reflect the more recently released movie *The Princess and the Frog*. The reasoning? According to NPR, there was an influx of complaints on the internet regarding the ride’s association with the 1946 film *Song of the South*, which is considered racist by today’s standards (and should have been at the time, but that’s another matter). Former Disney CEO Bob Iger has conceded that *Song of the South*, whose characters are depicted in the animatronic portion of the ride, is “not appropriate in today’s world.” Yes, the world is much different than it was in 1946. Disney’s *Song of the*
South absolutely does not fit in with today’s more equitable principles—though one would hope those principles include acknowledging errors of the past, rather than attempting to ignore or erase them from memory, because, whether positively or negatively, the world we live in today was ineffably shaped by that context; and, as philosopher George Santayana is reputed to have claimed, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Yet in the realm where pulling repeats from circulation is the go-to solution to all potential offenses of the past, cancel culture has thrived, from nixing sitcoms featuring now-controversial figures like Bill Cosby or Louis CK to firing the eminently cancelable stars of reality TV. From the days when many tuned in to hear Donald Trump on The Apprentice yelling “you’re fired” at poor contestants to a time when social media users obsess over whether or not Carole Baskin, featured in the Netflix reality series Tiger King, killed her husband and fed him to tigers—a stunning example of the ultimate cancelation—Americans seem to love a good canceling. When we aren’t Keeping Up with the Kardashians or watching the train wreck of Big Ed on 90 Day Fiancé, many among us bite our nails over who will accept the final rose on this week’s rundown of The Bachelor (and, in turn, who will be rejected).

One of the most widely recognized and well-known reality franchises of all time, ABC’s The Bachelor has had so much success across more than two decades that it has resulted in countless spin-offs, podcasts, televised weddings, hushed divorces, and thousands of advertisements. While cast members come and go, the face of The Bachelor, host Chris Harrison, has remained a constant part of the franchise. That is, until he was canceled himself in 2021 by
offended viewers. In the most recent season of *The Bachelor*, frontrunner contestant Rachael Kirkconnell was “canceled” after photos surfaced of her taking part in an “Old South” plantation-themed party in 2018. Kirkconnell was further criticized for “liking” Instagram posts with MAGA hats and the Confederate flag and for having a politically conservative father. When the franchise’s host Chris Harrison was asked for his opinion on the matter by former *Bachelorette* Rachel Lindsay, Harrison noted that our perspective now is different from our perspective in 2018 (the year Kirkconnell attended the “Old South” party).

A lot of “Bachelor Nation” was outraged by Harrison’s response, to the extent that he not only had to issue an apology, but also needed to announce that he would be “stepping aside for a period of time” from his hosting duties. To this point, Harrison had appeared on nearly every single episode of *The Bachelor*, including all its spin-offs. But, after nearly twenty years, Harrison was canceled. The story was everywhere: Twitter exploded, TMZ went ballistic, even Fox News host Dave Rubin called Harrison “deeply pathetic” for apologizing for his comments about cancel culture. Dozens of articles were published on *The Bachelor* franchise, and Harrison was mentioned in talk shows, news reels, TikToks, and everything pop and cultural in between.

But amidst all this noise, what genuinely newsworthy story did this Junk Food News distract us from? Corporate media’s indignant vidiots overshadowed a host of proposed laws intended to limit—some might even say “cancel”—certain Americans’ voting rights. In the first 36 days of 2021, Republican leaders proposed more than one hundred voter suppression bills. Similar to the
19th-century laws that once limited voters based upon literacy tests, property ownership, and skin color, these bills may make voting much more difficult in 2021. The suppressive tactics proposed in these bills include limiting mail-in voting access, imposing stricter ID requirements, rethinking successful pro-voter registration policies, restricting voting on Sundays, and enabling more aggressive voter roll purges—particularly among communities of color and other Democratic-leaning constituencies.\textsuperscript{33}

While corporate media “cancels” characters, movies, and reality television personalities for racial insensitivity, many of our own state governments are actively proposing bills canceling the voting rights of specific historically-marginalized groups of Americans, preventing them from freely participating in modern democratic elections. Where are the headlines and outrage over that, Fox News?

**MEGXIT FROM BUCKINGHAM PALACE: OPRAH INTERVIEWS THE ROYAL DOWN AND OUT**

On March 7, 2021 the American public waited with bated breath to see what “bombshell” revelations Oprah Winfrey would pull out of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry about their troubles with the British royal family. Viewers watched Oprah visit the couple’s Montecito mansion chicken coop in a “stars are like us” moment, attempting to make the couple appear relatable and humble.\textsuperscript{34}

Banking on the American public’s appetite for reality TV and drama surrounding British royalty, every major media outlet covered the interview. We may have become independent from the Brits all those years ago, but we
still touch our collective knee to the ground in deference to their amazing royal drama (with apologies to Colin Kaepernick). As the couple sat down with Oprah, they dove into topics ranging from catfights to mental health, centered throughout on Meghan’s terrible mistreatment. The royal family’s tea was served piping hot.

The real shocker came when Markle, a woman of mixed race, disclosed that the royal family was worried about the darkness of her unborn child’s skin.35 Who would have thought that the British monarchy, with its rich colonial past and deep roots in the slave trade, would be uneasy about welcoming a child with African DNA into its family? Well, Markle was as blindsided by this news as anyone! She made a point to tell Oprah that she was “naive” and believed the royal family would “protect” her.36 But the fact remained, Markle contended, that even though she is light-skinned, she is still Black in the eyes of several members of the royal family.

The role that colorism played in this drama should not be overlooked. Though some light-skinned individuals can “pass” as white and gain some privileges in the world, their dark-skinned counterparts cannot. On January 20, 2021, the United States welcomed not only its first female vice president (VP), but the first of African American and South Asian descent. People raved about the fact that the VP “looked like them” and how important it is to have a woman of color in this seat of power. While this accomplishment is undeniable and this moment in history is incredibly important, the fact nevertheless remains that, although VP Kamala Harris is part Black, she has a very light complexion. Lighter complexioned people of color hold privileges and are often afforded opportunities that
remain unavailable to those with a darker complexion. This pigment privilege started during slavery, when dark-skinned slaves were assigned to work in the fields while those with a fairer complexion were allowed to work in the slaveholder’s home. The pain that Markle felt should not be overlooked, but the reality is that she was considered light enough to marry into the royal family even as she was still dark enough to be regarded as a threat to their genealogy (which should’ve been threatened by all the royal marriages between cousins, but that’s a different matter). Her treatment speaks to the racism that continues to pervade even the wealthiest tier of society, yet her naivety also shows her privilege as a light-skinned woman of color. She identifies as mixed race, yet she did not claim her Blackness until it became a topic worthy of media attention.

Another revelation that came from Oprah’s primetime interview was Markle’s battle with her mental health and suicidal thoughts because of her vile treatment by the royals and the UK press. She disclosed that she attempted to get help but was denied it. Her decision with Prince Harry to “step back” from their senior roles in the family was her best course of action to regain mental stability, she explained to Oprah. Markle’s struggles with mental health were often pushed to the forefront of the news cycle by a wide array of outlets, including CNN, Fox News, and the New York Times, among others. CBS, the network that aired the interview in discussion, flaunted Markle’s personal struggles with the hope of capitalizing on sky-high ratings—and to CBS’s delight, a whopping 61 million viewers worldwide tuned in to the broadcast. Countless articles ran about Markle’s mental health, with
many voices weighing in, from healthcare professionals to tennis star Serena Williams. That corporate media and celebrities are attempting to “normalize” mental health matters is a good thing—but realistically, while Silicon Valley ventures like BetterUp (where Prince Harry is now a “chief impact officer”) talk about the mental health of individuals, they do nothing to address the structural issues that impact mental health, including one big one, racism.

Something that cannot be ignored in the “Megxit” interview is the obvious topic of social class. Harry and Meghan, while forced out of the royal family and cut off financially, will still end up on top. People all over the world are forced out of their families for a myriad of reasons, from sexual identity, to issues with addiction or mental health. The majority of people that this happens to do not have a safety net made up of millions of dollars from inheritance. There was even one fan of the royal couple who felt so bad for them losing all their unearned wealth that she set up a GoFundMe page to help with their expenses, and it did manage to raise a cool $110 before being shut down.

In the interview with Oprah, Harry mentioned that all he had financially was the money his mother had left him. Forbes estimates that, after a $5 million down payment on their home and a $3 million repayment for their earlier home remodeling, their net worth at the time of the interview was likely a measly $10 million. Yes, there is trauma for Harry from being denied by his family, but he and his family will certainly not suffer financially and apparently won’t starve for attention, either. Not to mention the fact that Meghan has her own money from her previous acting
career in the United States.\textsuperscript{44} The royal couple did mention in the interview the deals they were making with Netflix and Apple TV+, yet they failed to mention the worth of such deals (which is estimated to be above $100 million).\textsuperscript{45} So basically, they will be just fine, and able to afford the mortgage on their Montecito mansion in Santa Barbara County after all. Whew!

Another topic that was repeatedly mentioned in the “Megxit” interview was that the royal family will no longer provide Prince Harry, his wife, or child with security.\textsuperscript{46} This news left the couple shocked—how dare they be denied protection? Having personal security can be necessary for the safety of people with high social or political standing, but this seems absurd. The entitlement of these two, to assume that the British taxpayers would continue to pay for their security after they moved overseas and left their royal titles behind, cannot be overstated. They are worth millions still, and will only continue to acquire more money. They can definitely afford to pay for their own private security.

Security in general is a privilege that many people do not know. While Harry and Meghan’s interview was airing, the world continued to face the challenges associated with a global pandemic, so security was a very common and pressing issue for many. From feeling safe in society to job security, the COVID-19 pandemic affected not only peoples’ mental states, but their livelihoods as well. And just as Markle felt the impact of racism from the royals, Black-owned businesses in America have been feeling the impact of a global pandemic in a racist country rooted in white supremacy.

Most Black-owned businesses are located in neighbor-
hoods with a high minority population, often depending upon foot traffic. They are also mostly retail and restaurant businesses, which were some of the first workplaces to really feel the impact of the shelter-in-place and social distancing orders associated with COVID-19. Though the government ultimately doled out more than $500 million for small business loans in two installments to cover payroll, the majority of at least the first installment—not surprisingly—went to businesses where the population had a low percentage of Black and Brown people, thus leaving that community financially out of luck at a crucial time. In places like Lexington, Kentucky, the local government wanted to give 10 percent of its contracting dollars to businesses in need. This included female-owned and veteran-run businesses as well as minority-run businesses. The vast majority of those funds in 2020 went to non-Black female- and veteran-run businesses, leaving less than 1 percent for businesses that were Black-owned.

The media likes to focus on how corporations like Coca-Cola have “pledged to increase [...] purchases from Black-owned suppliers by $500 million over the next five years,” but what happens after those five years? A pledge is not a contract. These earmarking preferences and pledges from government and large corporations are band-aid solutions to larger problems for the Black community and are obviously not a sustainable answer, nor have they ever been. Like Markle, we really shouldn’t be surprised by the mistreatment of Black people in our society. Unlike her, however, most people in the Black community don’t have a $10 million safety net to fall back on or lucrative deals with Netflix when being Black works against them.
One of the greatest sources of Junk Food News has always been professional sports. You know: young, “good-looking” athletes with huge mansions and fancy cars, lavishly spending money and exemplifying lifestyles of the rich and famous. What could go wrong with that combination? Sports stories have long been used as analogies dating back to the days of traveling oral storytellers, when lessons were pulled from the trials and tribulations of losses and victories of our mighty sports figures. In the past, reporters might chronicle the struggles of an athlete hampered by an addiction or affliction to show his or her imminent rise from their darkest hour to triumph once again. But in a world where if-it-shames-it-leads reigns supreme, stories are not just related to the games on the field, but rather to the trials and tribulations off and well-off, as “fans” celebrate their heroes’ accomplishments while razzing the failings of erstwhile icons, all through online hashtags, ratings, clicks, and likes. When corporate media is already an industry that feeds off of distraction, what news story could better steal the limelight from scoreboards or professional accomplishments than the humiliation of athletes-turned-celebrity-multimillionaires? Scores of professional athletes provide a buffet to those who feed at the trough of Junk Food News. Totaled cars, infidelity, drugs, and strip clubs—misbehavior among the fallen warriors of today makes for salacious headlines direct from the wide, wearisome world of sports.

Many of these sports-star-gone-wild stories are forms
of humilitainment, where details are often left unexplored unless they might lead to sensationalism. There’s a headline, a photo, and a two-sentence caption cracking its way across the airwaves of corporate news. For instance, we all know Tiger Woods: one of the world’s most famous golfers. He was a Junk Food News goldmine in 2009 when, after crashing his car just outside his home in suspicious circumstances, he was revealed to have been cheating repeatedly on his wife Elin Nordegren for years, a story just strange and salacious enough to be thoroughly highlighted by the corporate press.50 Years later, Woods returned to his place as America’s sweetheart when he was filmed winning the prestigious Masters golf tournament and embracing with his son in 2019. All was forgiven and forgotten—well, until recently, when Woods found himself in the news yet again in February 2021, this time for crashing his luxury SUV at around 85 miles per hour in Southern California. Many fans were concerned about the professional golfer—not so much for his health and well-being, but instead for whether he would be able to compete in the 2021 Masters tournament.51

Americans love to stay up-to-date on the personal lives of professional athletes. Why do the Kardashians stay so relevant? Because they’ve apparently dated half the NBA! Whenever their names start to fizzle out, there seems to be another story on how Boston Celtic Tristan Thompson cheated on his baby mama Khloé Kardashian yet again.52 Ever heard of Jennifer Lopez? When her ratings were down, she just dumped her partner, former Yankee baseball All-Star Alexander Rodriguez, to jump back into the limelight. For his part, “A-Rod” coped with his public breakup by introducing his own line of makeup for men.53
Then there’s National Basketball Association (NBA) superstar James Harden. Considered one of the greatest guards of his time, the 2018 MVP and nine-time NBA All-Star explored a potential trade to the Miami Heat from the Houston Rockets. As one of the hosts of The Complex Sports Podcast noted on January 19, 2021, Harden “is a fit for the [Miami] nightlife and that culture, not necessarily the Heat culture.”

In other words, Harden loves to party, and his reckless and sometimes questionable nightlife behavior has frequently been picked up by corporate media outlets. When the media are more concerned with the off-court fouls of athletes than their on-court moves, it creates a bad look for professional sports franchises and leagues. However, such misbehavior seems to constitute excellent entertainment for the rest of us and great ratings for news corporations. Harden’s affinity for strip clubs was even picked up by the Australian news outlet news.com.au, which revealed that Harden reportedly spent $1.43 million at a strip club in Houston in just one night.

Accordingly, with a plethora of such distractions in Miami, the blockbuster trade was never finalized for Harden. He may have been denied the Heat, but by gossip reporters’ estimation he still set ablaze in Houston! Miami Heat veteran Udonis Haslem noted, “I would’ve aged 15 years trying to be his OG down here.” Lucky for Haslem that Harden is now holding court in Brooklyn with the Nets. Look out, New York!

While Tiger “King” Woods is totaling expensive SUVs and James Harden is allegedly blowing millions of dollars at strip clubs, corporate news outlets failed to acknowledge a multitude of stories that actually need to be reported to the American public. In February 2021 the National Foot-
ball League (NFL) produced a very COVID Super Bowl, proving global pandemic guidelines do not apply to multi-billion-dollar sports leagues. Despite the fact that millions of NFL fans have fallen ill, lost jobs, lost homes, lost family members, and lost lives due to the global pandemic, NFL owners only added to their net worth over the past year. Since March 2020 the 64 billionaire NFL franchise owners enjoyed a $98.5 billion rise in their net worth, collectively. That insane spike in revenue could be used as a stimulus check of $1,400 for more than 70 million Americans, many of whom are avid NFL supporters. The private gain of these sporting capitalists in the midst of so much public pain is particularly upsetting due to the fact that many of the franchises have been the beneficiaries of recent taxpayer handouts, with 28 professional sports teams receiving $9 billion in taxpayer subsidies over the past few decades. Nevertheless, thousands of low-wage stadium workers’ jobs were eliminated by the pandemic, while greedy owners continued to stuff their pockets. Of course, the obscene influx in net worth among professional sports team owners remained almost entirely unreported by corporate outlets, which instead freed up airtime for reports on James Harden’s spending habits—but hey, at least he is helping to support the economy.

CONCLUSION: JUNK FOOD NEWS—OF NOSTRUMS AND A NEW NORMALCY

The “new normal” associated with the COVID-19 lockdowns has caused Americans to turn to social media more than ever before to get their fix of infotainment. Trapped in their homes, expected to social distance, and addicted to
their devices, Americans have found more pleasure than ever in others’ humilitainment. And with less human contact than many have experienced in much of the modern era, for better or worse, Junk Food News has become even more of a societal norm that holds us together (almost as well as, say, Gorilla Glue). From Tucker Carlson’s absolute outrage over a song, to an NBA All-Star allegedly spending an exorbitant amount of money at a local strip club, the everyday lives of celebrities are dissected under a corporate media microscope. The use of personal digital devices has become so ubiquitous that apps like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and now TikTok, have shrunk the global village, and with it the realm of privacy, further than we’ve ever imagined. It is as if every millisecond of the day can be regularly caught on camera or documented in some way and shared with the world, regardless of its insignificance.

As John Reinke of the *Tiger King* remarked, “I’m sure y’all got a story to tell.” Do we ever. From the “stories” on Facebook, Snapchat “snaps,” and Instagram “reels,” to YouTube “shorts,” an armada of Twitter “fleets,” and ticktocking the time away on TikTok, we’ve all had stories to tell and way too much time on our hands. Regardless, these outlets have become the nostrums that make up the “new normal,” foreshadowing a post-pandemic normalcy we should all collectively “eek!”

While some may bemoan this barrage of the banal, there’s nothing new about indulging in celebrity gossip and tripe. For decades, Americans have read magazines, watched television programs, and followed the personal lives of celebrities and others to distract from the drudgery of daily life. A hundred years ago, journalists like
H.L. Mencken mocked the fickleness and anti-intellectual character of the country’s masses, referring to them as the “booboisie.” This past year, during the pandemic, bingeing on mundane, meaningless material online was amplified by access to technology and time alone. But the “new normal” has taken this enduring obsession one step further.

Americans are now demanding far too much from their celebrity counterparts, finding new ways to “cancel” their actions when they don’t live up to their expectations, and even, in some cases, hindering or destroying their careers. Too often, online policing such as this is a poor substitute for actual engagement in the wider community and politics. The reliance upon the lives of strangers through the mediated screen has developed into an addiction at worst and a cause for civic concern at best. These Junk Food News stories, sprinkled across social media and corporate news platforms alike, distract Americans from far more significant stories that could actually impact their personal lives and the lives of their fellow citizens. Indeed, though some TikTok teenagers fully believe their dance challenges will one day be in history textbooks, some of the truly significant stories of our time are passing unnoticed. As numerous states propose voting laws that could restrict certain groups of Americans from exercising their most basic democratic rights, we focus on what the host of a reality dating show said in a tabloid interview. And while Prince Harry and Meghan Markle cry poor from their sprawling mansion in affluent Montecito, Black-owned businesses continue to actually suffer deprivations in the unending shadow of the pandemic.

The corporate media, similar to the soul-stealing
TikTok algorithm, carefully choose the stories we see, and thus the ones many do not. In a digital world where people are reliant on communication devices, Americans should strive to recognize the stories that might actually impact their personal lives and better their communities rather than channel their energy toward their distaste for Cardi B’s latest performance or sink into the humilitainment of the next fallen Tiger King. The future of our democracy may just depend on how carefully we fashion our “return” to a new normalcy, one guided by civic engagement and equitable principles and not algorithmically manipulated by society’s baser elements.

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Notes

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17. Howard Kurtz, interview with Tucker Carlson, *MediaBuzz*, Fox News, October 9, 2016; that clip is viewable, with a transcription of the interview, via Media Matters Staff, “Fox’s Media Criticism Show Claims Other Reporters are ‘Overplaying’ Trump Tapes with ‘Manufactured Outrage,’” Media Matters for America, October 9, 2016.
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30. Rachel Lindsay, interview with Chris Harrison, Extra, Fox, broadcast February 9, 2021 and posted by “extratv” to YouTube that same night.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
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38. Winfrey, interview with Mountbatten-Windsor and Markle, Oprah with Meghan and Harry.
40. Alex Gurley, “Serena Williams Had the Nicest Things to Say about Meghan Markle, Proving We All Need a Friend Like Serena Williams,” BuzzFeed, March 25, 2021.
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51. Ibid.
56. Bicks, “Miami Heat Veteran Admits He’s Relieved.”
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.