CHAPTER 3

Junk in the Box:
Eat, Prey, Fight
Nothing Brings People Together (and Apart)
Like Junk Food News

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If I like a food, I’ll eat it, even if I know it’s not good for me.
—KIM KARDASHIAN

It’s also like if you go to a great restaurant, even if I’m a shitty date, it’s like at least the food was great.
—PETE DAVIDSON

WHAT’S ON THE MENU?

Who’s hungry? Craving something to fulfill your nutritional yearning, maybe something that’s not the most well-balanced meal? Then this year’s Junk Food News menu is for you!

“Junk Food News” is a term first coined by Project Censored founder Carl Jensen in 1983, defined as a category of sensationalist, inconsequential (but undeniably delicious in the moment) news stories that receive substantial coverage by corporate news outlets, thus distracting audiences from more significant, newsworthy stories. While our past Junk Food News stories have been categorized
as afternoon or midnight snacks, this year’s lineup is a luxurious four-course meal. As COVID fatigue began to fade and the once-mandated masks came off, Junk Food News grew more abundant and filling than ever. However, after two years of those masks, social distancing, vaccine debates, and overall uncertainty associated with the global pandemic, it was as if Americans had completely forgotten how to behave at the dinner table! These crude table manners left viewers stuffed to the brim with subpar stories, distracting from the real news that could and should be filling the menu of the so-called public airwaves.

This year’s prix fixe menu of Junk Food News is a four-course, Michelin-star meal of mediocrity and mendacity. Cocktail hour includes none other than Kimye’s inevitable divorce and the infamous Kardashian rebound, Pete Davidson. The charcuterie board boasts cheeses, meats, sausages, and hints of dicks in space—billionaires outspending each other to catch a glimpse of the world turning and burning from above. The main course of the delicious lineup this year is a hearty serving of superstar gossip, including brawls between a multitude of celebrities and cable news networks alike. Ever Heard of it? We know Johnny Depp has—along with millions of Americans who couldn’t turn away from the televised four-week, he-said, she-said defamation trial. To finish off this delectable meal there’s a finger-licking discussion about on- and off-the-field headlines regarding NFL quarterbacks—including controversies surrounding their blushing brides and deciding whether to actually spend time with their families, all while sexual assault allegations hit double digits.

This year’s Junk Food News menu, as copious as they
come, has also transitioned into fine dining. We all have to grow up eventually, don’t we? This subcategory of news distraction did just that this past year. While Kanye West (now Ye) openly stalked his eventual ex-wife, Kim Kardashian, and her new beau, Pete Davidson (of *Saturday Night Live* fame), no actions were taken, even as Ye acted out and showed undeniable signs of committing domestic abuse while the cameras rolled and millions tuned in. Remember the Cold War Space Race between the former Soviet Union and the United States in the 1950s and 1960s? Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk went ahead and turned that into a modern-day dick-measuring contest, for lack of a better phrase, to see who could get there first for the longest. Their space outfits, extensively reported on by CNN Science, received more attention than the pollution caused by this narcissistic billionaire power competition, in which one rocket launch produced an estimated 300 tons of carbon dioxide in the upper atmosphere, where it can remain for years. 2 But, lord knows, corporate media wouldn’t miss the chance to provide live updates as Musk tried to take over the fading social media platform of Twitter! Tweet, tweet.

Aside from the annual Keeping Up with the Kardashians banter and our growing collective disdain for mostly hand-me-down billionaires, additional celebrity gossip served as this year’s Junk Food News main course. With daytime trash TV hosts Maury Povich and Jerry Springer officially retired, celebrities took matters into their own hands. Hollywood giant Will Smith kicked things off when he whacked comedian Chris Rock in front of the Academy Awards audience at this year’s Oscars in what would become known as “the slap heard ’round
the world.” Spotify podcast giant and UFC front man Joe Rogan stepped into the Octagon to face off against CNN, while Whoopi Goldberg challenged the daytime television program *The View*. But a new group of drama kings emerged this year: NFL quarterbacks! From retiring for a total of forty days before a triumphant return, to a concerning number of sexual assault accusations, some of the highest-paid athletes in the United States made waves both on and off the turf. And, you guessed it, the media had a field day! Why report on US/NATO history as Russia invades Ukraine or the disappearing of an entire TV network from cable services and YouTube, when one could focus on the guaranteed $230 million contract of a known sexual predator?

We hope you came hungry for this year’s Junk Food News chapter. The world has certainly transformed since last year’s “return to normalcy,” and Americans ate it up. Despite the upgrade to fine dining in this year’s go-around, the kitchen never closes when it comes to Junk Food News. So, pull up a chair, imbibe your drink of choice, and enjoy the titillating idiocy of this year’s top Junk Food News stories. *Bon appétit!*

**KIMYE: CHAMPAGNE MARRIAGE AND A BEER BUDGET DIVORCE**

Of course, one of the biggest junkets from the past year was perhaps more contagious than any of the COVID variants spreading: Kimye. Got. Divorced. The family whose names nearly utilize the entire compass finally went their separate directions: Kim Kardashian West’s relationship with Kanye West went south (no mention of how North
West, their firstborn, is doing). Less than a year after their separation Kanye (now known simply as “Ye”) reportedly bought the house directly across from Kardashian, paying nearly ten times the asking price so he could be near his children. This sparked a range of internet jokes, including, “This is how Gatsby got shot” and “Do you think he’ll try holding up a boombox outside?” Others seem to think it’s a way for him to keep an eye on his ex-wife’s new beaus, and perhaps intimidate them.

Meanwhile, in another shocking twist, Kardashian began dating the walking embodiment of what twelve-year-olds think is cool, the champagne of beer, Miller Low Life, Pete Davidson. As a popular recent Saturday Night Live alumnus, Davidson was known for a myriad of things, including, according to CNN Business, leaving the popular show. Before that, he was known for his very public relationship with Ariana Grande that ended in 2018, and his hit song with Timothée Chalamet, “Yeet.” Davidson has become relatively infamous for his capability to pull in such attractive, rich women, which was cause for an even bigger avalanche of jokes, but not at Davidson’s expense. Rather they were aimed at all other men: examples include “Maybe Pete just texts back at a normal rate” and “He probably doesn’t use a 2-in-1 shampoo conditioner combo,” and the best for last: “Maybe he asks Kim what she wants to do.”

No matter what traits Davidson has that could be considered green flags for a partner, the internet certainly was enthralled with whether their relationship is a strange conspiracy, perhaps set up by Momager Kris Jenner? Could it be that their whole relationship was a long plot devised by Davidson as revenge for having to pick up a
hefty Nobu dinner tab that West (Ye) had racked up one birthday celebration? Diving deeper into the rabbit hole, Ye recently started dating actress/model Julia Fox, who once modeled as the Barbie to Pete Davidson’s Ken in a photoshoot for Paper magazine. Coincidence? Twitter users with too much time on their hands say it’s not. Supposedly, Ye is so unhappy and jealous of his ex-wife dating Davidson that he went immediately to spoiling the nearest woman connected to Davidson that he could—Fox. Never mind that Fox and Davidson never dated, nor ever showed any romantic inclination toward each other, Ye quickly moved in for the kill after meeting Fox on New Year’s Eve 2021 and was already in a committed relationship before the end of the first week of 2022. Since we finished typing that sentence (less than a few months after the start of the relationship), Fox and Ye broke up, with Ye already starting a new relationship with a beauty influencer who looks remarkably like his ex. Basically, Ye is developing new relationships faster than COVID develops new variants.

But the worst part of it all is the extensive news coverage of the whole farce. Ye and Kardashian seem to be everywhere—once confined to gossip columns of People magazine and E! television, the trash TV icons have reinvented themselves to appear as regulars on the streaming platform Hulu, as well as make headlines for CNN, BBC, and even the award-winning San Jose Mercury News. But what these news outlets and others have missed is that Ye is openly stalking his ex-wife, and no one seems to care.

With his Twitter rants and recent raps dissing every new addition to Kardashian’s life (including a bizarre Claymation music video in which he appears to behead Davidson),
Ye has been engaging in undeniably questionable behavior toward his estranged wife. According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, “stalking is a serious issue affecting more than six million people each year. . . . [I]t is often one of many tactics that abusers use in order to maintain power and control over a current or former intimate partner.” Stalking partners is especially evident in pop culture, with this situation being no exception.

In fact, the National Network to End Domestic Violence also notes, “All too often, messages in the media portray stalking as an extreme, even desirable, display of love and devotion. Or, the behavior is minimized and normalized, attributed to a change in social norms that we should accept.” The Network goes on to say, “While it may seem harmless, the more we normalize and accept these messages, the harder it can be for victims of stalking to identify the harm they’re experiencing, to be believed if they disclose it, and to be supported if they choose to reach out for help.” Although we laugh at the vapid nature of many celebrities, it cannot go unnoticed that Kardashian’s safety is on the line in a very real way. And in this specific case, both parties may have bitten off more than they can chew. . . . With this being only the first course, it is going to be a long meal. Some of you may want to grab the antacids and a critical thinking textbook, stat, and possibly open another bottle of whine.

**DICKS IN SPACE: BILLIONAIRES PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF TASTE**

It was the “year of space tourism,” “the year of the billionaires,” the year space became “sexy all over again.” Between
summer 2021 and spring 2022, there were hundreds of news stories across corporate media outlets celebrating and/or criticizing the billionaire space race. While this rich dude bratwurst dish appears filling, it turns out that all this news is about as nourishing as a tin of Vienna Sausages.

The news of the billionaire space race launched in the summer of 2021 with Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, Twitter’s aspiring stepdad, Elon Musk, and Sir Richard Branson of Virgin Group boldly going where no one could afford to go before—all vying to buy a spot in history. CNN was one of the main media outlets covering this new space race in detail, centering its reports on the dick-measuring contest between the three magnates. In its business pages, CNN covered the sword fight between Bezos and Branson vying to be the first to launch themselves into Earth’s upper atmosphere, with Branson scooping Bezos by nine days to be the first of the billionaires to take a suborbital flight, via his company Virgin Galactic, on July 11, 2021.¹⁰ Not only was Bezos’s Blue Origin flight upstaged by Branson, but Bezos also lost a $2.9 billion government contract from NASA to build the next lunar lander module, prompting Bezos to go to court to cry about it. If we’re taking out the old measuring tape and doing this, SpaceX’s Inspiration4 flight in September 2021, bankrolled by another man with too much money, did measure bigger and longer than both Bezos’s and Branson’s suborbital flights, going higher than the International Space Station and orbiting Earth several times in a three-day period. Musk’s SpaceX has since transported astronauts to the International Space Station, while Bezos’s Blue Origin has mostly made news for shuttling PR-grubbing celebrities and rich brats into space for mere minutes. Since the
failures and mistakes reported in Branson’s short flight, the media have reported that Branson plans to fly next on a SpaceX vessel, while also scolding the vassals back on Earth to slow down while driving to decrease European fuel demand from the West’s continued and renewed Cold War enemy, Russia.

Of particular interest to the *New York Times* was Star Trek’s William Shatner launching into space in October 2021, on Bezos’s Blue Origin flight. *The New York Times* alone published stories on October 4 and October 7, several on October 13, and another on October 14 on this specific topic. News outlets gushed as the famous “Captain Kirk,” known on television in the 1960s for his own virility and libido in space, became the oldest man to journey into real-life space. Also wasting fellow Earthlings’ time and attention was the news that Pete Davidson was pulling out of a relatively quiet plan that would have seen the first comedian in space. Any of us normies offered a flight may fear the safety of these billionaire-funded endeavors, but Davidson had the added worries of rocket sabotage by Ye and/or the likelihood of Kim Kardashian moving on to her next beau while he was briefly off-planet. Fox News reported that comedian Ricky Gervais, while on the *Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, said that he had also turned down an offer to do a short comedy set in space. That’s a double whammy, in that we got a news report about a celebrity comment made on a late-night show about an event that wasn’t going to happen.

Throughout this modern-day, privatized space race, there have been a multitude of stories regarding what these billionaire astronauts were wearing. These news pieces weren’t confined to Entertainment and Style sections but
often appeared on the Science and Technology pages of historic publications. For example, the *New York Times* Science pages offered a story about the designs of the uniforms worn by self-styled space cowboy Jeff Bezos and his crew. Any chance those space diapers can be retrofitted for your Amazon workers and delivery drivers denied bathroom breaks, Jeff? Talk about averting a modern Triangle Shi[r]twaist Factory fire! We also learned that Elon Musk hired the costume designer for movies like *Batman v Superman* and *The Avengers* to create functional space suits worthy of Hollywood red carpets. He realizes those are movies, right? Bringing sexy back, indeed.

The billionaire space race has not been without its criticisms, from realistic analyses of the dangers of space travel in the hands of civilians to warnings from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* against the further expansion of unregulated Big Tech into space. Joining critics of this “cosmic country club,” notable silver-spoon monarch Prince William weighed in, earning himself several fawning news pieces by Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal*. But with the royal family’s history of environmental exploitation and degradation, it doesn’t appear that Prince William has a third leg to stand on. We get that you were a “real” pilot, but if you want to enter this contest, you’ll need to whip out something bigger than the private jets you normally charter. Only one independent news source, Truthout, reported on a Media Matters for America study that found that morning TV shows gave as much airtime to Bezos’s 2021 space launch as they did to *all climate crisis news* in 2020. Maybe Prince William forgot his place in the global elite, the top 1 percent, that Oxfam showed in late 2020 emitted more than double
the carbon pollution of 3 billion of the world’s poorest people.17 The Oxfam study was actually well reported on by a panoply of sources—some even mainstream-corporate—that included CNN, Forbes, CNBC, BBC, the Guardian, and even government-owned news outlets in William’s home country, the UK, no?

While Bezos bobs around in space, the behemoth creature he left behind, the Amazon corporation, made its own news as its package-packed vans swarmed across the Earth. Legacy media outlets such as the New York Times have covered the battle between the Amazon corporation and its employees. We know of the years-long new stories about the pissy labor conditions of delivery driving for Amazon, but more recent news has focused on the efforts of warehouse workers to unionize in Alabama and New York. A New York Times report published around the time of Bezos and Shatner’s little voyage headlined a story “How Amazon Crushes Unions.”18 We’re truly living in a post-apocalyptic movie, one that feels like it was written by Mike Judge (Idiocracy, Beavis and Butt-Head) and directed by John Carpenter (They Live). Corporations are allegedly persons before the law, but ones with limitless protections. The rich are cosmonauts escaping Earth to people new planets. Meanwhile, the rest of us will be left here on Earth eating Soylent Green, which, if you didn’t know, is made out of people.

In the meantime, corporate media (Fortune, CBS, the Guardian, Fox Business, CNBC) have been discussing the rising pay of CEOs through the pandemic. What goes unmentioned in so-called mainstream news is that the top 1 percent dodge upwards of $160 billion in taxes a year.19 According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic
Policy, because of Amazon’s tax breaks, it avoided over $5 billion in federal taxes.\textsuperscript{20} Also escaping the attention of corporate media are the stories covering the potentially $10 billion Congressional participation trophy—rather, bailout of Blue Origin—so Bezos could build a lunar lander, after losing his court challenge to NASA, which decided to go with Musk’s SpaceX for the job. So, American taxpayers essentially helped pay for executive chair Bezos to cosplay as Bruce Willis in \textit{Armageddon} and go joyride in space. It is the public subsidizing these wealthy ego trips into space. Why can’t these billionaires pay for their own phallic flights to the moon (and perhaps take up residence there)?

If we had to choose a winner in this space race so far, it would undoubtedly be Elon Musk’s SpaceX. That’s SpaceX, mind you, not Musk himself. Musk has become bogged down in negative press, covering everything from his loud, scammy squawking about buying out Twitter in the name of free speech, to his intimate ties with the embroiled Amber Heard and Johnny Depp—did you hear that they divorced and that we were all a part of it? Meanwhile, SpaceX has continued in 2022 to launch rockets and Starlink satellites to ferry real astronauts back and forth to the International Space Station, causing no scandals in the media whatsoever. Actually, no so-called mainstream news as of mid-May 2022 had turned toward Business Insider’s report that SpaceX paid $250,000 in 2018 to settle a sexual harassment claim by a corporate jet flight attendant stemming from a 2016 incident in which Musk bared his human penis and offered the flight attendant/licensed massage therapist a horse in exchange for an erotic massage.\textsuperscript{21} Regardless of how the story pans out,
it has already blasted off with the corporate media’s undivided attention.

In the midst of all this cosmic melodrama, scientific sources have remained concerned (some since the 1990s) over the increase of space junk orbiting Earth, pieces of debris abandoned over years of space exploration. *Scientific American, Nature, New Scientist,* and even the *Washington Post* have reported on “space junk” and the dangers space debris poses to the world’s space stations and satellites in 2022. An article from The Hill in November 2021 featured a science team’s prediction that this space junk would eventually form Saturn-like rings around Earth.22 While proponents of the billionaire space race argue that it will make space travel cheaper and more advanced in the long run, more reputable sources such as *New Scientist* report on the damage done by increased space junk on astronomical studies years in the making.23 Then there are the physical, potentially fatal, risks facing astronauts on the International Space Station (ISS), who had to delay a spacewalk in November 2021 because of the threat of space debris.24 One would think that 20,000–30,000 pieces of dangerous space junk would be the focus of the news media, particularly as these pieces of junk interfere with real-life scientific endeavors and crash into bodies like the Moon. But warning the worldwide public that Musk is a misogynistic massage creep (which is also an issue) has taken and will continue to take higher priority than the ever-growing possibility that space debris might hit the Earth, the ISS, future rocket flights, and more. Literal space junk food news around men catapulting their junk into orbit. It remains all too convenient to blame debris falling to Earth on China, as was the case in May 2021 and May 2022.25
In addition, many scientists worry about the long-term effects this modern-day space race may have on future Earthlings. According to a recent study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) covered in *Popular Mechanics*, the increase of black carbon being put into the atmosphere because of rocket fuel will likely increase the temperature of the stratosphere by up to 4 degrees Fahrenheit. The report notes this temperature rise could dampen the ozone layer and alter atmospheric circulation. In short, this is not good news.

Also less reported than the schadenfreude-infused stories about the characters of Musk and Bezos are the ones about possible solutions to cleaning up space junk created by China, the US, Russia, and India. There have been only a handful of establishment media stories about these efforts, or at least, the need for efforts such as these to exist. Humanity has penetrated space and ejaculated our dangerous litter. Take it from there, NASA and Space Force and ... real scientists. But, unlike here on Earth with the climate crisis, we can’t possibly be blaming space pollution on the world’s individuals when it’s only the largest corporations, the military–industrial complex, and the wealthiest humans assaulting our orbital space to bring their massage-and-cowboy-couture culture up into the cosmic country club. We can only hope the media won’t add to this corporate-sponsored blame game and continue to shrug off stories about the climate crisis.

All of this news hasn’t been fruitless, however. We commend the phallic memes created over the course of the billionaire space race. We also commend the entrepreneurs out there like the porn website that created a line of sex toys called the “Billionaire Flesh Rocket” series. In a
way, this exploration has not been in vein—sorry, vain. In Branson’s case, space is no longer Virgin. And as the billionaire space race continues, so in turn will the massive, girthy attention paid to it by corporate news media as the world burns.

**UNHAPPY HOUR: APPS ’N’ SLAPS FOR THE TABLE**

Meanwhile, down here on the ground, the ultimate undefeated Junk News champion that captures our imagination (and most importantly, attention) is a circle jerk that only celebrities can provide! We all know that some of the most widely viewed programs on television are live, from the Super Bowl to the Academy Awards. However, those events are essentially one-offs that can’t maintain a distracted public for more than their allotted 180-minute airtime.

But the elite in the entertainment world know that truly sustainable distractions are the soap operatic lives of the celebrated rich and infamous, as they war in court, on talk shows, or over social media. So much like the pastie nip slip seen round the world when Justin Timberlake ripped Janet Jackson’s top off during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show (no wardrobe malfunction, just misogyny as entertainment), Will Smith’s right-hand strike across Chris Rock’s left cheek during the live presentation of the Academy Awards became the headline-grabbing slap heard ’round the world. As ever, substantive stories of the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the United States’ own twenty-year war on terrorism would fall off the front pages, if not off every page, to make room for such hot
goss.

Yes, for the absolute purest form of uncut Junk News look no further than the intersection of celebrities and news-types fighting for all our First Amendment rights (because we all know the fight to regulate guns challenging the Second Amendment will not come between conservative senators and their economic love affair with the NRA, no matter how many innocent members of the public are sacrificed in the meantime). Or, more specifically, fighting for our attention as they hammer out who among them has the right to say what. These media types are judge and jury, inviting us to be the executioners, doling out punishment in the form of public shaming, extended coverage, hashtags, and slaps.

Professional megastars, who earn their multimillions through the art of mindless entertainment, ripped a chapter out of Jerry Springer’s book circa 1995, as they fought for their right to grab headlines and trend through no-holds-barred shocktainment. Oscar winners, comedy legends, podcast royalty, talk TV celebrities, and legacy media pundits all jumped into the ring (or, in UFC front man Joe Rogan’s case, the Octagon) this year, as they faced off in a war over who had the right to say what, while seeking to enlist us, the American consumer audience, to take up arms in the form of our social media handles. And did we ever!

Going full tactical nuclear with our hashtags, we left no celebrity freedom-of-junk-speech fight unscathed in the clashes of Chris Rock vs. Will Smith, Joe Rogan vs. CNN, Whoopi Goldberg vs. *The View*, Sam Elliot vs. Jane Campion’s chaps, and Campion vs. the Williams sisters, not to mention Amber Heard vs. Johnny Depp, revealing poorly
worded sexts for the world to see—celebrities really are like us! The divisiveness and resulting outrage become a full-time job: tweeting and retweeting in a thirsty search for likes pulls us away from real-world nuclear war concerns and US foreign policy hypocrisy. Did you hear about the plan to redeploy US troops in Somalia with a “persistent presence”? Sorry, as you can tell from these last few pages, we’ve been distracted.

In this massive grab for ratings and subscriptions, the new king of talk, Spotify’s podcast majesty Joe Rogan, reigns over legacy media. In response, rather than doing what the podcaster does with his haphazard interviews—exploring topics that might not otherwise see the light of a monetized platform—the hired hands of CNN and others go on the attack. So, whether we turn on Spotify or a cable network, we find ourselves transfixed by different angles of the same story. Are the pundits who rush to their split screens to express their shock and awe for thirty seconds sincere in their overzealous diatribes? Audience members have to wonder if said pundits are truly concerned about Rogan’s questionable questions or whether they’re just trying to pull viewers back into the legacy media’s fold. If it trends, it leads.

Meanwhile in Hollywood, Sam Elliott, Oscar winner and co-star of the 1989 homoerotic Roadhouse, went on Marc Maron’s WTF podcast and attacked Power of the Dog director Jane Campion for the overuse of chaps and the implications of that wardrobe choice. Campion clapped back, calling Elliott a “B-I-T-C-H” on a red carpet. Fast-forward a few days, and the white Campion let African American tennis pros Serena and Venus Williams know that they didn’t confront the type of adversity
Campion herself faced in the Best Director–nominated Oscar pool that saw her face off against only men. But we were told not to worry about that one—it was just a joke that didn’t land, unlike Chris Rock’s joke that landed him the “slap heard ’round the world” from Will Smith. Not live, mind you, as ratings for the Academy Awards were down this year, but the seemingly innocuous joke by the comedy veteran about Jada Pinkett Smith’s hair and the slap back that followed by her husband, Will Smith, took over social media, legacy media, and even the Joe Rogan podcast, grabbing headlines far and above the peace summit that was taking place in Turkey between Russia and Ukraine.

Not to be outdone by Smith vs. Rock, Johnny Depp and his posse of bodyguards took the bout against his ex-wife, Amber Heard, to the courts, seeking a payoff that would make even World Boxing champion Floyd “Money” Mayweather blush. There’s nothing quite like a month-long trial (coming after years of buildup) filled with sordid details to grab sustained headlines and spawn a whole slew of fanboys who weaponize YouTube with their daily excerpts from the trial, persuading fans who can’t tune in for four-hour testimonies how they should feel. Good thing we were able to watch this live stream of a former celebrity couple trading blows, but we haven’t heard a word on the trial regarding the partner of the late serial molester Jeffrey Epstein, Ghislaine Maxwell. Meanwhile, millionaire and megastar Depp will emerge millions richer from the trial. Surely, he won’t make the same mistake his former domestic partner did by not following through on a pledge to support organizations dealing with victims of domestic abuse.
Doubt that the headline-grabbing celebrity circus is pure uncut distraction? Ask yourself, “What are the two most memorable quotes of 2022?” Surely, it’s somewhere between Mr. Smith’s “Keep my wife’s name out your f–king mouth” and Ms. Heard’s “My dog stepped on a bee.” Those quotes will certainly be remembered more by the public than President Joe Biden’s “gaffe” when he said that Russian president Vladimir Putin “cannot remain in power” or former president George W. Bush’s epic Freudian slip in a talk he was giving at his presidential center in Dallas. Bush “mixed up” his own murderous regime’s illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003 with Putin’s current war in Ukraine when he quipped it was the “decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq.” Bush then quickly made a joke of it, muttering under his breath, “Iraq, too, anyway,” as he corrected himself to awkward laughs from the audience. Perhaps it’s our presidents who should take some advice from Smith, and keep the names of foreign countries they want to invade, and leaders they want to undermine or eliminate, out their f–king mouths.

**FINGER LICKIN’ BAD: WAGS BLITZ THE QUARTERBACKS**

When life gets crazy and things feel uncertain, it is always nice to have one constant to rely on: watching two teams of grown adult men trying to absolutely kill each other every autumnal Sunday, Monday, and now Thursday and sometimes even Saturday, via the National Football League (NFL). And now, insatiable Americans that we are, we have even added one more game to the regular
season schedule. This way, the Detroit Lions and Jacksonville Jaguars fans can feel included for a whole extra week! Aside from the grotesque multimillion-dollar contracts that could solve world hunger and the grueling injuries that leave 300-pound men knocked out cold, members of the NFL made headlines for a multitude of reasons this season, both on and off the field.

First, Satan himself, quarterback Tom Brady, announced his retirement. And thank God. Creeping up on forty-five years old, Brady is married to an ultra-rich supermodel, has won more Super Bowls than any NFL franchise, and is considered one of, if not the greatest quarterback of all time. In February, he announced he would be hanging up his cleats for good, and rival fanbases shared a collective sigh of relief. But after nearly six whole weeks off the field, Brady had evidently spent more time with his family than he could handle. The quarterback announced via Twitter that he had changed his mind, would be unretiring, and would return for his twenty-third NFL season. Brady proves that some men can have it all.

But some men can’t. In contrast to Brady, Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers positioned himself as public enemy number one, midseason. After he claimed he was “immunized” to COVID-19, it was revealed that Rodgers had lied about his vaccination status to the media, and liberals had a field day. Despite going on to win the 2021 Most Valuable Player award and signing a record-breaking $200 million four-year contract in the off-season, Rodgers received a mountain of backlash for opting to take Ivermectin, which liberals derisively call a “horse dewormer” (the use for which the drug is mostly known), to treat a virus that caused a global pandemic.
Rodgers was forced to isolate for ten days, causing the star quarterback to miss a key week-thirteen matchup against the Kansas City Chiefs. Not only that, but the mounting mass media pressure ultimately caused Rodgers and inarguably the world’s most exciting actress, rumored fiancée Shailene Woodley, to split. I guess we can’t all be Tom Brady.

Yet the want-to-be NFL power couple that caused the most off-the-field ruckus was Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes and his now-wife, Brittany Matthews. Aside from giving birth to the couple’s first child, Sterling Skye, the WAG (a term often used for an athlete’s wife and/or girlfriend) was making headlines for exuberant sideline celebrations at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City with then-future brother-in-law Jackson Mahomes. Things heated up when a tiff between Patrick and Brittany was caught on camera at a Texas Tech University basketball matchup, as Patrick reportedly told his future wife, “No more resting bitch face,” triggering an immediate reaction. But Mrs. Mahomes faced severe backlash when a viral tweet showed her spraying champagne on Kansas City fans in 37-degree weather after the team defeated the Buffalo Bills in the AFC divisional round of the 2021 playoffs. The future Mrs. faced so much criticism for her actions, she began selling T-shirts with the slogan “Free Brittany” in her defense. However, the twenty-six-year-old’s life isn’t all bad—she and high school sweetheart Patrick tied the knot in early March. The new Mrs. Mahomes wore a custom-made Versace dress, paired with an 8-carat engagement ring that is rumored to have cost well over $150,000. Husband Patrick signed a blockbuster deal in 2021 that led to an average
annual salary of $45 million a season—second only to, you guessed it, Aaron Rodgers. So, despite the accountability poor Brittany faces for her public actions, she can use hundred-dollar bills to wipe her tears.

But one of the biggest off-season headlines was about a fourth NFL quarterback, Deshaun Watson. Watson was signed by the Cleveland Browns for a blockbuster fully guaranteed, five-year contract for $230 million. Proud recipient of the most ensured money in NFL history, Watson sat out all of the 2021 season, due to trade-offer standoffs with the Houston Texans and, oh yeah, twenty-four outstanding sexual assault and misconduct cases. Recently, the NFL quarterback settled twenty of these civil lawsuits, paying off a plethora of massage therapists who accused Watson of pressuring them to touch him sexually. Still, the NFL is adamant about an indefinite suspension for the Cleveland Browns Quarterback. According to the Baltimore Sun, “A person familiar with the case told the AP the league believes it presented evidence to warrant keeping Watson off the field this season [and that] he would be required to undergo counseling before returning.” Despite the turmoil his off-field behavior has created, Watson’s contract remains fully guaranteed, a rarity in the NFL.

As these quarterbacks, including Watson, make headlines across the sports world, news outlets continue to ignore sexual assault survivors while promoting their abusers. An article by Rachel Thompson of the Guardian notes, “research suggests that it can take years—sometimes decades—for some survivors to realize or accept that their experience amounts to sexual assault or rape.” Thompson goes on to say that a US survey estimated “a
staggering 60 percent of female university students have experienced unacknowledged rape,” and that “between 30 percent and 88 percent of all sexual assaults go unacknowledged by survivors.” These horrifying numbers leave many survivors of sexual violence questioning their sanity and actions, especially with such little support and so few resources. So, while ESPN, SportsCenter, and the local networks celebrate abuser Deshaun Watson’s record-breaking NFL contact, an astounding number of victims and survivors of sexual assault continue to suppress their experience, for their own personal sanity. With that in mind, are you ready for some football?

CONCLUSION: LET THEM EAT JUNK!

Americans have faced an upward battle since the world decided the COVID-19 pandemic was over. Sky-high inflation, a fuel crisis while attempting to avoid an all-out World War III, supply chain shortages on everything—material, produce, labor, even baby formula. Can’t find what you need at the store to feed your infant baby? Inflation so high that the cost of living is becoming unattainable for a large percentage of the middle class? American leaders today mirror Marie Antoinette, telling their people to eat junk, instead. Because, as the “post-COVID” society pushes forward in an uncertain world, Junk Food News remains constant.

Unfortunately, however, that seems to be just the problem. Americans look to these Junk Food News stories and truly believe this is all that is going on in the world. Monica Lewinsky—yes, that Monica Lewinsky—describes a recent Junk Food News story, the Depp v.
“Heard trial, perfectly: “a pure car wreck: accessible, tawdry, and immediately gratifying. We dispense with critical thinking and substitute the cheap thrill. Such scattershot consumption hasn’t allowed for real comprehension.” As we witness the bits and pieces of these narratives, we begin to actually identify with these stories, torn between our “relationships” with celebrities—as if we actually know them ourselves! Again and again, we line up for the buffet of junk food—or, in this year’s case, a prix fixe menu—and devour the mundane mediocrity of mainstreamed stories. Unfortunately, we, as Americans, continue this pattern with no signs of slowing down.

So, as you make your daily drive down the information superhighway of corporate-controlled public airwaves, social media, podcasts, and streaming services, rest assured there is an ample supply of conveniently packaged breaking, and broken, junk news to consume. Distractions, one after the other, streaming into our cerebral cortex, make network executives jealous at the 24/7 programming. The junk food counter is open with seemingly tacit coordination between all the talking heads, knowing when to jump off one distraction to the next: just as Ye fades, Bezos pops up. As Musk wanes, Will Smith slaps back. As the Super Bowl concludes, Brady unretires. Analysts, podcasters, YouTubers, and the consuming public jump on board, battling amongst themselves over Junk Food News stories. Rewards for privileged misbehavior are high, with the true cost being a well-informed public and civic engagement.

These concrete patterns of Junk Food News reinvent and reintroduce themselves to American audiences every year. And, as if Americans have never witnessed them
before, we gorge ourselves on these unvarying stories, each echoed by nearly every so-called mainstream outlet. These accounts can no longer act as a façade to the reality of our current societal state. It is one thing to enjoy Junk Food News as a guilty pleasure—but when stories of this quality are all that are regularly presented to and digested by the American public, there just might be a problem that goes beyond the menu. We need to look at who and what is cooking in the kitchen.

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**Notes**

9. Ibid.
31. Tom Brady, Twitter post, March 13, 2022, 4:13 p.m.
35. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
40. Ibid.