CHAPTER 3

News Abuse of 1999

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Previously titled “Junk Food News,” this chapter switches focus to those overreported news stories that fill our media (and minds) with fluff or “fat” and take attention away from the more substantial stories that comprise the rest of the book. This process is “news abuse.”

Thanks to the members of the Organization of News Ombudsmen who were asked to rate their choices for the most obsessively overreported stories of the year.

1. Tinky Winky and Jerry Falwell’s Theory on this Purple Teletubby
2. Pokémon
3. Y2K
4. Millennium
5. Pamela Lee Anderson’s Breasts
6. Star Wars
7. Clinton—The Clinton’s Search for a House; Monica Searches for an Apartment; the Release of Monica’s Book; Hillary’s Side of the Story Interview.
8. Columbine/Teen Shootings; Killer Classmates; Marilyn Manson Delays Video Release
10. George W. Bush and Cocaine

When the brainstorming began for this year’s News Abuse chapter, no one needed to have actually owned a TV, subscribed to a mainstream newspaper, or listened to a mainstream radio station in order to have known
about the stories that won the dubious honor of becoming a part of this year’s edition of News Abuse (NA).

These awards do not negate the overabundance of coverage these stories received in the last year in mainstream media. What the News Abuse awards succinctly illustrate is how stories that are often irrelevant, inflammatory, or simply self-serving information conduits can insinuate themselves into the fabric of our daily existence. Once stories reach the heights that the top 10 choices for this year have, how plugged-in you are has become all but irrelevant.

One example of a self-serving new story is the story about Jerry Falwell’s fixation with the purple star of Teletubby fame, Tinky Winky. Tinky was pinpointed by Falwell as a menace to our social fabric, and he viewed the gender neutral character as the deliverer of subversive messages to children, influencing them to accept homosexuality. According to Falwell, Tinky’s purpleness, his purse, and of course, the triangle headpiece, are clear signs of homosexuality. Indeed, malice on the part of a national figure toward a children’s television character is news, but should not reach the sensationalized frenzy of a major mainstream news story.

When a story reaches the sensationalism boiling point, and however newsworthy an issue’s roots may have been, the story can deteriorate from genuine to pulp to infotainment. These stories create the macabre manifestation of voyeurism impersonating national dialogue. As News Abuse stories reach mythical proportions they insinuate themselves into the social conversation, to the exclusion of thousands of stories carrying the weight of real news.

This phenomenon is poignantly illustrated by the Columbine killings story. When we return to the tragic scene in Littleton for the cleanup and the first day back, and the funerals, and the first football game, and the last football game, it becomes News Abuse. Readers, viewers, and other news consumers become addicted to the endless stories of terror and grief. Television news ran the same footage, over and over again, for weeks, milking every bit of sensationalism out of the tragic shooting spree and ensuing deaths of the young teens. Other stories of teen shootings were dredged up to further drag out the story. The abuse of the media sent every news outlet to Littleton while failing to report other news of daily importance.
Not willing to stop the exploitation of the Littleton teens and their parents, media also gave free air time to celebrities, however remotely connected with the case they might be. One high-profile press release came from Marilyn Manson, who used it as a PR opportunity to promote his new violent music video, announcing he would delay it out of respect for the Columbine victims. Not willing to be outdone, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* star Seth Green, bothered that the Columbine shootings focused criticism on violence in entertainment, said, “I think that’s the wrong way to go. You can have 10,000 kids watch *Natural Born Killers*, and only one or two are going to go shoot people....” Nice spin, Seth.

It seems our list is never complete without the requisite blockbuster movie release. This year’s production, *Star Wars*, made a valiant effort at becoming the movie release promotion of all time. Not only did we get to hear about the new *Star Wars* movie, but we got to hear about its producer, his entire list of works, the early editions of *Star Wars*, the stars of *Star Wars*, where they are now, the making of *Star Wars*, and the expansion of Lucas Film Industries, and Industrial Lights and Magic. Perhaps the most uproarious speculation of all was the discussion of a possible economic collapse, as predictions warned of a high worker absenteeism on the film’s opening day. Of course, this story would not have been complete without the in-depth coverage of the waiting lines, who was in them, how long they had been there, and how many times they had gone to see the movie. The only question we are left with is, What were you doing the day *Star Wars* was released?

More somber, but no less fetishized, was the coverage given to the plane crash of John F. Kennedy, Jr. Since a generation of people remember where they were the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, many viewers took it to heart when the son they had watched grow up disappeared in a mysterious plane crash. Mainstream media clutched this story to its metaphorical bosom, capitalizing on the death of this beloved celebrity, just as they had with the death of Lady Di. Media unscrupulously gorged on historical footage, falling over themselves in their frenzy to get JFK, Jr.’s picture on their magazine covers, inflicting endless map drawings of the Vineyard upon audiences.

This obsessive coverage was not limited to the United States. In war-torn Iraq, where the high death toll from the bombing and sanctions has affected
everyone’s families, a woman approached a U.S. journalist. “When you get back to America, please send a letter to the Kennedy family saying a woman in Iraq is very sorry to hear of their loss.” How many Americans are sending sympathy cards to the millions of grieving Iraqi families? Then again, they were not all over the news.

The eventual discovery of the wreckage of JFK, Jr.’s plane did little to alleviate the crush of Kennedy information. Instead, the press used each new release of information as a further opportunity for exploitation and a reason to discuss Kennedy’s personal finances, his prenuptial agreement, and the debate over whether the recipients of his money were worthy.

At Project Censored headquarters, we are well aware of the paradox created with the News Abuse chapter, as we select overcovered stories for the dubious honor of a place in our NA Top Ten, ambivalently giving them just a bit more coverage. As if to exemplify this quandary, in the number seven spot, down from its number one spot in last year’s Censored 1999 Junk Food News List, we again find President Clinton and his entourage of faithful followers. Embraced by the press, Clinton’s sex life continued to be the topic of conversation with the release of Monica Lewinsky’s book, and prominent interviews of both her and Hillary Clinton, for their respective sides of the story.

The endless prattling about Clinton’s sex life was supplemented this year by an enthralling account of the Clinton’s hunt for a house, and Monica’s hunt for an apartment. A story that did not make it into the Top Ten is Hillary’s run for Senate, which, of course, was primarily a sidebar of the story of the Clinton’s search for real estate.

Coverage of the private lives of politicians did not stop with the Kennedys and the Clintons. Presidential candidate George W. Bush and his alleged use of cocaine was an irrepressible NA story throughout 1999. The debate raged over whether he used seven, or fifteen, years ago, and whether he was a better man than Clinton for being honest about his use, or non-use. The mainstream press deemed this an appropriate measure of his ability to be president, rather than discuss his historical ties to the Savings & Loan scandals, the media, or discuss the fact that the same man, as Texas governor, has been especially ruthless and unforgiving to drug convicts in Texas. That shining example of hypocrisy also unfortunately escaped much
of the media. This hashing-over of politicians’ private lives is out of control.

We may just have to finally acknowledge that politicians are human and get on with it. It hardly matters what they stand for; we all know the real issues here are promiscuity, drug use, and personality.

Then there was Pokémon. This newest craze in a long line of crazes has succeeded in capturing more airtime than two other airtime monopolizers, the Furbies and the Beanie Babies. We are sure that this had some deep, meaningful impact on the manufacturers of these fad toys, but we are unclear as to its national importance, especially in relation to the many undiscovered or ignored stories about real news events around the nation and the world.

Coming in at our number five NA spot are Pamela Lee Anderson’s breasts. Over the span of only a few years we have been subjected to the intimate details of her marriage to Tommy Lee, his incarceration for domestic violence, their eventual breakup, and their much touted reconciliation. What the nation’s media took most to heart, however, was the news of her breast reduction. What a relief it was to hear that she and Tommy would be renewing their vows after the surgery, this time in the nude.

Ending on a somewhat ambiguous note, our last two stories are similar in content, but have their own idiosyncratic natures. By the time this book is released, the consequences (if any) of Y2K, and the impending millennium,
will already have been revealed. For now the media satisfies its gluttonous appetite for calamity by maintaining a voracious stranglehold on news that is not news, exploring the possibilities of a catastrophic outcome, based on an arguably arbitrary date set 2,000 years ago. The predictions for the millennium range from those of apocalyptic proportions, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tidal waves, to the prophesy of the second coming of Jesus Christ. The millennium has become one giant cash cow, as companies see dollar signs and fan the flames of fear inspired by mainstream media’s extemporaneous predetermination.

The current barrage of coverage regarding Y2K is dramatically underscored by its utter lack of coverage in the previous decade, during which time scientists vainly attempted to draw attention to this potential problem. When Y2K became a trend and a selling point, then the discussion was reared its head regarding an impending crisis.

Other stories under consideration for News Abuse included the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and Jesse “The Body” Ventura; the proliferation of stories of multiple births; Bill Gates and Microsoft; the Dow Jones hitting 10,000; and the weather, including cyclones, hurricanes, earthquakes, El Niño, and El Niña. This year we also had a list of previous Junk Food title holders, including O. J., the ever present Viagra, JonBenet Ramsey, the Jenny Jones murder trial, and Jerry Springer. Stories that were nominated by our ombudsman judges but did not receive enough votes to get into the Top Ten were the Egypt Air and Swiss Air crashes; The Blair Witch Project; and Warren Beatty for President.
Finally, the following comments were submitted from individual ombudsmen in response to our questionnaire.

**Carl Jensen**, founder of Project Censored: It is a wonder the United States survived 1999. Employees shirked work to sit out on sidewalks to purchase over-priced tickets to see Star Wars; Bill Gates, a.k.a. the anti-Christ, monopolized the computer industry and threatened to take over all electronic communications; Jesse “The Body” Ventura inspired wrestlers, boxers, and other extreme sports figures to take over the political process; Viagra aroused thousands of over-sexed males to attack women; and Y2K threatened to end life as we know it.

Fortunately we survived all the News Abuse. But we did not learn much about the real problems that plagued America—including the 25 critical issues raised in this book.

However, we will not have to worry about the typical junk food news in the year 2000. The news media in 2000 will be dominated by the most apocalyptic of all News Abuse—the quadrennial explosion of political News Abuse. The media will loudly decry the trivialization of the presidential election and the influence of money but then go on to portray it as an expensive horse race, characterized by endless polls, political scandals, and unending 20-second television sound bites.

**Emerson Stone**, columnist at *News Practices* and *The Communicator Magazine*: On JonBenet Ramsey: Ye Gads! Can’t we ever shuck this tawdry unexceptional schlock? And on air crashes: Unending coverage. Twenty years ago such crashes got a day or two in news and were gone. Now, we must learn about every grief counselor, every caregiver, every non-denominational service, every flower wreath floated out to sea, every … But why do I go on?