CHAPTER 4

Junk Food News and News Abuse

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“Junk Food News” consists of the cotton candy headlines and soda pop stories that make up the basis for what we often know as news in this country. Media feeds off our desire to escape the humdrum world around us with an emphasis on celebrity “news.” Famous lives provide us with a sugar rush and a false reality that radiates in comparison to the darkness that shrouds what’s really going on in the world. Genocide, war, big business machinations, and the manipulation of Third World countries can’t hold a candle to what Gwyneth Paltrow chooses to wear on Oscar night. We are seemingly a nation obsessed with celebrity.

This is why we write this chapter, and this book, in fact. Our current system of corporate-controlled media isn’t doing the job it was created to do: inform the American public of matters requiring national attention. A tabloid mentality has invaded somber news outlets leaving America in the dark about significant issues and events, and promoting our national ignorance. The fluffiest of the fluff that is handed to us by our media is what we call “Junk Food News.”

The 23 members of our Media Censorship class brainstormed the initial list of 20 Junk Food stories. To narrow it down to the Top 10, we sent copies of the list to all 150 Project Censored interns, as well as Sonoma State faculty evaluators. In addition, the list went out via e-mail to the thousands of people on the Project Censored listserv.

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Everyone was asked to pick their personal Top 10, along with the Top 5 News Abuse stories that will be elaborated on later in this chapter. As the votes came flooding in, they were meticulously tallied to determine who would rank supreme in the Junk Food War.

And the “winners” are:
1. Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman’s divorce drama
2. Puff Daddy and Jennifer Lopez’s relationship roller-coaster
3. Mariah Carey’s fall from sanity
4. The reduction of Pamela Anderson’s “liquid assets”
5. Robert Downey Jr.’s frequent and inevitable drug busts
6. The “are they or aren’t they” question regarding Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake
7. The constant invasion of the private lives of Prince Charles and his sons
8. The suspicion and confirmation of Rosie O’Donnell’s sexuality
9. Dubya’s daughter’s alcoholic escapades
10. Michael Jordan’s wishy-washy decision making skills

Number 1, with an overwhelmingly clear majority of the votes, was the Tom Cruise/Nicole Kidman saga. While the West Bank found itself in the throes of a bloody civil war, our nation took sides in this tawdry battle. There was the Nicole camp—“Tom must have strayed with that tramp Penelope Cruz,” his costar in Vanilla Sky. And there was the Tom camp—“Nicole obviously cheated with Ewan McGregor,” her costar in Moulin Rouge.

Number 2 on our list is another fraught relationship. Puff Daddy (or is it P. Diddy now?) and Jennifer Lopez headed to Heartbreak Hotel. But the drama was so much more involved this time. First they made headlines by dating—she’s Latina and he’s African American. Then there was talk of a marriage, which had tongues wagging across the globe. What would one of the most beautiful women in America wear to her wedding? Next came a shooting, in which Puffy was accused of mischief with J.Lo as a witness. The final blow came when, during Puffy’s trial, J.Lo dumped him, and the rumor mill churned about her
supposed involvement with a backup dancer in her crew while she was with Puffy. Eventually, Puffy was acquitted and J.Lo married the dancer, and they all lived happily ever after.

Number 3 brought us Mariah Carey. Poor Mariah, the weight of being an megasuperstar proved to be too much for her. Her first feature film flopped faster and harder than *Howard the Duck*. The corresponding soundtrack CDs were used as Frisbees in backyards around America, and she had herself a mental breakdown. When she came out of it—although that may be debatable as of yet—her record company paid her to go away! She was given millions upon millions of dollars to take her “talent” elsewhere.

Next, in the number 4 spot, we have Pamela Anderson’s breasts again. We last featured them in “Junk Food News” in 1999 in the number 5 position. Her breasts have taken a step up the Junk Food ladder, while taking several steps down in size (or did they?).

Number 5 this year went to Robert Downey Jr. and his drug addiction. Being a drug addict is nothing to joke about. But when you’re being arrested for it every other day, going to court twice a month, and being let off with a slap on the wrist, reality seems warped. Here we have a clear case of someone who needs help, but because he’s a celebrity, he’s allowed to break the rules. When he should have been sent to rehab or jail, he was allowed to go home and get high again.

Barely missing the Top 5 dishonor roll was the innocent relationship between Justin Timberlake (of *NSync) and Britney Spears at number 6. When their “togetherness” was finally confirmed, the entire world breathed a sigh of “we knew it.” Then we all wanted to know if they had consummated it yet. Britney professed to be a virgin, insinuating that Justin wasn’t getting any. How much was true, we will never know, but why do we care in the first place?

Lucky number 7…the private lives of Prince Charles and his sons. So what if Charlie was publicly out with Camilla Parker Bowles? Haven’t they been eyeing each other since before Princess Diana
was in the picture? Why was Prince William’s sex life of utmost importance to America? He’s a young man with urges just like any young man. Then there’s Prince Harry: smoking pot, getting drunk, failing school. You’d think he had recently experienced a horrific tragedy, cast in the permanent shadow of his devastatingly handsome brother, and consistently hounded by the media.

The coveted number 8 position is held by Rosie O’Donnell. The inclusion of this entry on the Junk Food list was the topic of some controversy. We should preface this entry by saying this: the sole purpose of the Junk Food list is not to be humorous. It’s meant to highlight the various stories that were overcovered and sensationalized and took precedent over more pressing matters in society. Rosie’s sexuality and her ability to come out is no laughing matter, especially to members of the gay/lesbian community. The fact that it was sensationalized points to the contention that our society has a long way to go in terms of sensitivity to and understanding of gay and lesbian issues.

The escapades of George W. Bush’s daughters held our number 9 position. The media had a field day with their underage drinking and naughty behavior. But instead of using this story as a tool to teach younger kids to be smarter than that, it was used as a superfluous reason to bash Dubya. And we heard about it for weeks.

Last, but most certainly not least, Michael Jordan squeaked into the Top 10 in the last position. Number 10 belonged to #23, with his cycle of retirements, comebacks, and his newest tribulation: his separation from his wife. Even that held no water as they quickly got back together. It seems that indecisiveness runs in the Jordan family.

Corporate media has built a successful entertainment dynasty on Junk Food News in our society. They repeat the message that money and status consistently overshadow ethics and morality. This message treats us all as passive voyeurs in the drama of life, status, and power.

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NEWS ABUSE

News Abuse is a new addition to our Junk Food News chapter. News Abuse highlights those stories that had the emotional aspects to them that the corporate media fed on like jackals to a fresh kill. It would have been inappropriate to include these stories with the preceding ones because of their sensitive nature, but we felt it was just as important to show the abuse of journalistic reporting in this area as well. Our concern with the bastardization of these stories was significant enough for us to include them in a separate but equal forum with Junk Food News.

Media’s knack for going straight to the emotional center of a story and turning it into a tabloid headline is often at the victim’s expense. Even the lives of readers are manipulated by the repeated hashing out of unfortunate situations in life. Innocent bystanders’ worlds are disrupted by the bombardment of relentless reporting of someone else’s tragedy. Needless fear and rage can occur in the witnessing public.

We presented voters with a list of some of these “Headlines of a more serious nature.” Results of our poll produced the following top five News Abuse stories for 2001-2002:

1. Gary Condit/Chandra Levy scandal
2. John Walker—American Taliban
3. Anthrax Scares
4. San Francisco dog mauling case
5. Summer Shark Attacks

Since April 30, 2001, and well into the time before 9-11, the Chandra Levy case had nearly uninterrupted news coverage. The case drew national attention when the name of Representative Gary Condit, (D-CA), who represents Modesto, surfaced in the investigation. Until the disappearance of the former intern in May, Condit was a name

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few people outside California’s 18th District had ever heard. Because of this case, he has become the nexus of a media frenzy surrounding the young woman’s disappearance and the eventual finding of her body. Within days, the congressman’s political life began to unravel, which made this story even juicier. Pundits began to wonder what would happen at election time and as November elections emerged, Condit’s loss was a media event.

The focus of the coverage centered on the nature of Levy’s relationship with Condit, who initially denied any involvement in her disappearance. Six weeks after Levy disappeared, Condit had become the center of intense media interest. Not a day went by that the story didn’t appear somewhere in the media. He was everywhere it seemed, and he had the same thing to say every time, which wasn’t much.

Chandra became a celebrity in her own right. She was scrutinized and dissected in front of and by the whole world. Was she a spy? Was she pregnant? Was she threatening to tell his wife? Why didn’t she do something about her hair? But the tawdriness of this drama outweighed everything else. Dozens of other young women have disappeared or lost their lives since she was reported missing, but their disappearances haven’t gotten the same coverage because they don’t have that “dirty-little-secret” quality to them. The illicit affair between an older married politician and his young impressionable intern, on the other hand, became a media circus.

The media has had a heyday with the mysterious disappearance and have blown it out of proportion. One can go to a search engine such as Google and get 54,800 hits on Chandra Levy, suggesting that the story may be the biggest News Abuse story of all time.

Another story that was overtly sensationalized was the John Lindh Walker Taliban tale. Politicians were at odds in their views on how to deal with this young man. Many were found crying for his blood, and that attitude sits well with a large majority of their constituents. Others called for understanding and compassion. At age 20, he is one of the most hated men in America. Pictures of Walker captured
and tied up have been in circulation and some appear to be souvenir photographs with Special Forces troops shown “posing with their prisoner” and a profanity written across Walker’s blindfold. Shall we mention that the Geneva Convention prohibits activities that might humiliate prisoners?

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft said, “The United States does not casually or capriciously charge one of its own citizens with providing support to terrorists. We are compelled to do so today by the inescapable fact of September 11—a day that reminded us in no uncertain terms that we have enemies in the world and that these enemies seek to destroy us.” And at a news conference on January 15, 2002, Ashcroft said that Walker identified himself as “a Muslim who wanted to go to the front lines to fight…. Terrorists did not compel John Walker Lindh to join them. He chose to.”

Bill Jones, a friend of Walker’s family, told Good Morning America on December 4, 2001, “as far as we’re concerned, he’s a victim of the Taliban.”

Walker’s family believes he was subjected to intense propaganda from Islamic extremists. In December 2001, Eugene Fidell, president of the National Institute of Military Justice said that, in the case of Walker, “It’s irresponsible to speculate what will happen because we don’t know all the facts yet.” The real question, however, is until we get the facts, shouldn’t we too reserve judgment on Walker? Aren’t we being subjected to intense propaganda like he was by our own media machine? Some say that the media’s focus on Walker substituted for the lack of eagerly awaited reports on the finding and killing of Osama bin Laden.

Following close behind Walker we had the number 3 story, the anthrax scares. This was a case of The War of the Worlds gone crazy. Media has had us all running scared, afraid to open our mail and buying up Cipro. In reality, until the events of 9-11, there hadn’t been a case of inhalation anthrax in the United States since 1978. There were only 18 cases of inhalation anthrax in the U.S. from 1900 through 1978 and 224 U.S. cases of skin infection between 1944 and 1994. Anthrax as a disease in

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animals has been around for tens of thousands of years but rarely does anthrax cause serious disease in humans. These facts were generally overlooked.

Anthrax has been called the perfect germ for bioterrorism as related to the ability for control of mass spreading of the disease among the population. It isn’t contagious; only those exposed to a release of spores get sick. Thus, there’s no chance that a release of the germs will boomerang and kill unintended victims. In October 2001, the National Center for Infectious Diseases, Division of Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases, stated that the recent exposures to anthrax appeared to have come from letters containing powdered anthrax spores, but there was no cause for panic.

Still there was an extensive media scare about the dangers of “catching” anthrax. Reports of anthrax-laced letters sent to members of Congress in Washington and to television network offices in New York started a panic that multiplied when anthrax-by-mail attacks ended up killing five and sickening at least thirteen. In October of 2001, an assistant to NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw contracted the skin form of anthrax after opening a “threatening” letter to her boss that contained a suspicious powder. Bob Stevens, 63, a photo editor for The Sun, was the first person in 25 years in the United States to die of the inhalation form of anthrax. Many New Yorkers and other people across the nation started stockpiling Cipro, the antibiotic that they think will treat anthrax.

Overemphasizing the incidents of anthrax exposure caused fear and anxiety within our nation. For instance, reporting that the governor of New York, George Pataki was taking Cipro, even though he had never even been tested for exposure to anthrax, only helped to increase the public panic of those seeking prescriptions for the antibiotic. People were hoarding it as though doomsday was approaching.

The number 4 pick for most abused serious news item was the San Francisco dog-mauling case, the ongoing saga of two attorneys,
Marjorie Knoller and Robert Noel, whose dog attacked and killed Diane Whipple outside her Pacific Heights apartment. Again the media coverage was relentless. How many times did we have to relive how Knoller’s and Noel’s dogs, Bane and Hera, horribly mutilated Diane in January 2001, a scene so horrific that rescue workers needed counseling? Over and over again, we bared the tragic loss with Whipple’s partner, Sharon Smith.

This story was repeatedly covered in the San Francisco Bay Area and soon became a nationwide daily soap opera. There were startling “revelations” at every turn: the dogs really belonged to inmates in prison, the inmates ran an illegal dog-fighting ring, Noel and Knoller had sex with the dogs, Knoller prodded Hera to attack Whipple, and on and on. Although the public originally thought of this as an accident, when Noel and Knoller placed blame on the victim, defended their murderous canines, and so candidly and publicly displayed a lack of remorse, they became their own worst enemies in the courtroom. They broke one cardinal rule of their profession after another. Lawyers were watching from the sidelines, wincing every time they opened their mouths.

A key element of the case, mostly ignored by the corporate media, was the stunning legal gains for gay and lesbian partners. The legal rights married couples enjoy has now been extended in the courts to lesbian couples and a clear precedent has been set. A personal rights victory is perhaps one small gain from this over-sensationalized personal tragedy.

“Summer Shark Attacks” was rated number 5 for our News Abuse list. Out of 79 shark attacks reported worldwide in 2001, 51 occurred in the United States, and 34 in Florida. New Smyrna Beach on the Florida east coast was named the shark attack capital of the world as 21 documented attacks were recorded there last year. By August 27, 2001, there were 10 bites in 8 days and beach patrol officials closed a quarter-mile stretch of the beach, eerily reminiscent of Jaws. This is when the news media ran the shark attack stories in abundance, even though minor shark attacks are fairly common in this popular

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surfing area. Six of seven attacks in one week in April occurred on this same stretch of beach. Joe Wooden, deputy beach chief for Volusia County, reported that sharks are drawn to the area because it is rich in baitfish. Shark attacks occurred because so many surfers were out splashing around in the water, not because sharks were getting more aggressive.

Suspense and drama built up as headlines flashed in horror-like fashion. George Burgess, director of the International Shark Attack Files at the University of Florida, said, “I don’t think it indicates we’re under siege or anything like that, for the results are almost inevitable given the conditions.”

The question is why then the endless reporting of these particular incidents? Because it had a scary humans-under-attack factor that played upon the fears of a nation still reeling from the movie Jaws.

Spear fisherman Kent Bonde had a chunk of his calf bitten off by a Bahamian shark, but he doesn’t blame the shark. He says, “We are not part of their menu. It’s their ocean. We are taking a calculated risk.” But it was not that information that was reported. We heard all about what Dr. Tamara Burke, an emergency room physician at Rand Memorial Hospital in Freeport, had to say. After this second attack in two weeks in the Bahamas she advised everyone to stay out of the water. Because it is quite unusual to get two shark bites in waters off the same island in two weeks, he felt that a “phenomenon” was going on “that we don’t understand yet.” And news hype picked up again when Jessie Arbogast, an eight-year-old boy was attacked by a shark in July in Pensacola, Florida and ended up having his severed arm reattached.

CNN had labeled this the “Year of the Shark.” No doubt they were hurting for other news coverage. In reality, the notion of a shark stalking humans is pure fiction, in spite of what was being said in the media. It may sound logical, “but it’s not biologically logical,” said Samuel Gruber, a University of Miami professor and internationally

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renowned shark authority. Shark attacks, scientists say, are almost always random, and this year’s total, despite the “Summer of the Shark” media stories, is fairly typical. There were deaths from shark attack injuries—one in Virginia Beach, Virginia and another in Avon, North Carolina, but coastal residents, tourism officials, and beach-goers were trying to be calm about the situation. “It’s causing a panic that doesn’t need to be caused,” said Terri Behling, spokeswoman for the Center for Shark Research at Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota.

As you have seen, these last five stories needed to be handled with kid gloves. There is nothing humorous about a dog gruesomely mauling a young woman to death and it certainly isn’t funny that another young woman has turned up murdered after being missing for a year. We want to emphasize that while these stories were important, the corporate media has used their high emotional content to build news ratings by over sensationalizing the most shocking aspects of each story. All five News Abuse stories were turned into lurid tabloid news, and not one got the thorough, meaningful coverage it deserved. They were developed like movies with a focus on the genre-specific aspect. We had a horror movie (shark attacks), a mystery (Chandra Levy), a thriller (anthrax scares), a spy movie (John Walker), and a drama (dog mauling). It is a real wonder we weren’t encouraged to treat them like entertainment, with popcorn ads in between showings and dancing soda pop on our screens.