CHAPTER 5

Junk Food News and News Abuse

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As an aside to our annual research, Project Censored shifts focus from important news stories that aren’t being covered properly, to frivolous stories that are covered excessively over long periods of time. Dr. Carl Jensen, founder of Project Censored, coined the name Junk Food News.

In order to understand how issues of great importance are sidelined or censored, it is interesting to identify what is replacing them and why. Junk Food News stories generally deal with celebrities and brings in great ratings. Yet, though there are plenty of outlets for this sort of inconsequential entertainment, we repeatedly endure what is essentially gossip in place of meaningful news coverage.

Meanwhile, the lack of global exposure, local significance, or educational value is raising concern and dissatisfaction among many. To exemplify the waste of our precious airwaves, the Project Censored community casts its votes to determine the top ten most over-reported, empty-calorie news stories of the year. We point a finger at these sensations and encourage the world to ask the fundamental question: “Why should we care?”

The common response to this question is as frustrating as the problem itself. People don’t like to hear bad news, and media
organizations are becoming less fond of covering it. The original intent behind television and radio news was to keep people informed of politics and events that affect their lives. As time rolls forward we observe a shift in focus from education to entertainment, from service to ratings. People who support this kind of programming may want to avoid feelings of guilt, depression, or responsibility. The problem is that, when all is said and done, we can’t hide behind Tom Cruise’s latest love affair. We are responsible to one another for our decisions and our actions. By sacrificing news for useless gossip, we are hiding from real and inescapable issues that can only get worse.

Another explanation for the wide acceptance of this sort of media coverage may be that our expectation of news has been deliberately reconstructed by the media to advance ratings and corporate profit, rather than to advance the well-being of the general public and environment.

That being said, here are the top ten Junk Food News stories of the year. Enter the world of the superficial:

1. Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston breakup
2. The media obsession with Paris Hilton
3. Mary-Kate and Ashley Olson (business and personal lives)
4. Ashton and Demi Moore love affair
5. “Newlyweds” Nick and Jessica Simpson
6. Reality TV stars’ lives
7. Britney Spears’ pregnancy with Federline and upcoming reality TV show “Chaotic”
8. Barry Bonds and other baseball players on steroids
9. Kobe Bryant trial and confrontations with Shaquille O’Neal
10. Martha Stewart prison journals

Martha Stewart is a figure who is loved by some and loathed by others. But recently she has felt particularly unloved by our judicial system. Brought down on charges of fraud in a personal stock sale, Martha struggled to continue her business pursuits behind bars, and journalists jumped at the chance to call her a liar and a criminal.
But, as it turns out, we can look forward to a bigger Martha news blowout in the future as her house arrest term ends and the CBS TV movie *Martha: Behind Bars* (starring Cybill Shepherd) goes on the air.

Los Angeles Lakers guard Kobe Bryant’s sexual offense case was an obvious media target; his tremendous talent and popularity in the NBA made for a textbook contemporary cover story. If the TV-viewing audience loves anything, it’s to see one of their nation’s most popular role models transform into a monster. Though charges have been dropped, Kobe will inevitably struggle to regain his reputation.

And where would our chapter be without the belligerent blubbering of some of baseball’s finest? With the publication of Jose Canseco’s over-hyped autobiography, *Juiced*, Barry Bonds and several ball-playing behemoths were implicated in the use of illegal supplements during their stellar careers. The corporate media, of course, focused their attention on big hitters and their personal steroid issues, while the use of performance enhancing drugs in high school and college sports programs continues to go largely unnoticed. Ignoring a golden opportunity to address a serious health concern for many current and future professional athletes, corporate news chose to prey on the sob stories of baseball legends like Jose Canseco and Barry Bonds. America watched as Mark McGwire cried and reached for his water at the congressional hearing, denying any use of steroids. But it is unlikely that Jose’s or Mark’s performance will do anything to resolve the enhancement drug invasion that continues to plague serious athletes around the world.

Watching Britney Spears, the long time sex symbol, get married and pregnant is inspiring to her fans and annoying to everyone else, but for the corporate media it’s nothing but marvelous. Her wedding, impregnation, and upcoming reality TV show promotions have all taken place in the same year, meaning that both Britney—and news coverage of her—will soon swell like never before.

Reality TV has clawed its way into reality through the mass media; the personal lives of reality stars have been highlighted to no end. The American public seems to have an endless appetite for
Reality TV programming, and their options are growing like corn in Nebraska. Channel surfing tomorrow will undoubtedly mean sifting through an abundance of new and old reality shows as more and more get the “green light” from hand-rubbing studio execs.

The problem, however, is that when reality TV invades our news broadcasts it takes away people’s rights to abstain from the growing craze. It seduces people into accepting these characters as important in their lives. The distinction between Reality TV and actual reality is being breached by this persistent programming; the more these shows and “celebrities” appear in our news, the more real they become to the viewers. The dramatic and childish behavior seen in numerous reality TV shows is not realistic nor is it acceptable, and the excessive news coverage of such shows does nothing but encourage people to think otherwise.

Number five on the list are the ever-popular Newlyweds Nick and Jessica. With careers in music and reality TV, both Jessica and Nick can’t be avoided, but need they appear so often in our news? It seems the endless commercials weren’t enough; broadcasters found it necessary to plug Newlyweds as if it were a political debate. The significance of these figures extends no further than entertainment; and they should be presented accordingly. Granted, the couple looks good in a photo, but their story belongs in Star Magazine, not on CNN.

Once again Ashton and Demi have worked their way into the lineup. The couple’s fifteen-year age gap has been a huge deal to the press, not to mention the fact that again we are dealing with two sex symbols. Corporate news can’t seem to keep its hormones under control. Punk’d creator and movie star Ashton Kutcher is only beginning his career, while long-time heartthrob Demi Moore has been on dorm room walls for decades. The fact is, these figures belong on dorm room walls, not on news studio teleprompters.

Coming in third this year are Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. The infamous countdown to their 18th birthday on June 13, 2004, marked a new low in useless information, and journalists were more than ready to take the dive. Hype about Mary-Kate using cocaine erupted into news broadcasts as the world took pride in
overexposing and tormenting a young woman with anorexia. The intense media focus on these young women has an unhealthy impact, not only on the twins, but also on the world at large. One can’t help wonder what effects such obsessive and critical coverage can have on the mental and physical health of the countless young women who idolize the duo. Coming in second (by only one vote) is heiress Paris. Her reality TV show (an international embarrassment) was a very lucrative success, and her new movie *House of Wax* hasn’t done too badly either. But what about Paris Hilton so fascinates the corporate news media? Basically, she’s hot—oh yeah, and an heiress. Either way you can’t avoid her. Meanwhile, the sex footage that Rick Salomon took of Hilton certainly hasn’t harmed her “career” and reporters are still salivating over the income that even the mention of her sex life brings.

Coming in first this year is America’s favorite couple to gossip about, Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston. Their epic breakup came as a sad surprise to many, but it was a pot of gold to a corporate journalist. Speculations immediately filled the airwaves about Brad Pitt getting friendly with Angelina Jolie on the set of *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. The real reason behind the split between Brad and Jennifer isn’t known for sure, but evidently all theories have a place in the corporate news.

**News Abuse**

Sometimes news coverage begins with good intentions, only to fail under the weight of redundancy and a predilection for scandal. As a story unfolds and news stations across the country give it coverage, their message is received by millions of viewers. Each moment of coverage is a vital (and very expensive) privilege. It is important that the people making these decisions take that privilege seriously. When these precious moments are misused, it generates a condition we refer to as News Abuse. These are stories that have merit and some importance, at least initially. But when these stories become the target of salacious hype and an obsession with petty
minutiae, it diminishes not only the credibility of the organization covering it, but the importance of the story itself. The audience begins to forget the humanity, and even the elements of the story, as it becomes buried beneath the circus of coverage.

What follows is our list of some of the most abused and over used stories of ’04 and ’05. They were voted on and ranked by our students listserv members at Project Censored:

1. The Michael Jackson trial
2. The Peterson trial
3. The Terri Schiavo tragedy
4. The perennial Terror alerts
5. The Kerry coverage (Vietnam/botox/flip-flopping)
6. Howard Dean’s scream
7. Dan Rather’s Bush-Service-Record report (his retraction and demotion)
8. Bush’s Thanksgiving surprise for the troops
9. Discussion (ad nauseum) of the Swift Boat ads
10. Condoleezza Rice (her promotion, her brain, and her clothes)

Often a single event will occur that unleashes a number of follow up stories. From this, news programs will manufacture a series of “cliff hangers” that leave the audience eager for the next update. The latest Michael Jackson trial has provided just such an opportunity. From January 15, 2005 through the end of May the New York Times alone turned out more than 60 articles pertaining to Jackson. If a mouth opens about Michael Jackson during his trial there will be reports on it. If he dances on the hood of a car or shows up late to court, it’s on our doorstep the next morning. It is not clear that audiences actually prefer details that are insignificant to the real importance of the story. But under the current “cutting edge is dangerous” paradigm, networks seem disinclined to explore the deeper issues.

The conviction of Scott Peterson brought closure to a tragic ordeal this year, and it also marked the end of an immense media fixation. The fact that Laci Peterson was pregnant at the time of her
disappearance made the story uniquely devastating and reporters knew its shock value would make it take off instantly. Meanwhile a mother and father had lost their daughter, their life, as they knew it, their grandson-to-be, along with their privacy.

The Peterson trial received such a sustained barrage of coverage that some relevant information did actually emerge, such as the fact that, in the United States, the leading cause of death for pregnant women is no longer childbirth, but as the victims of murder by their male partner. Yet this startling statistic received the same perfunctory analysis as any other tidbit of the trial, giving it the same news “weight” as (for example) the fact that Scott’s extramarital affair was with a massage therapist.

The Terri Schiavo tragedy, at number three this year, began as a sad family struggle and evolved into a political battle of epic proportion. A number of important social debates emerged from this story initially, but they soon became so encumbered by partisan rhetoric that any attempt at honest debate was quickly lost in the political melee.

At number four this year are the ubiquitous and strangely unsettling terror alerts. It’s difficult to imagine where the world would be if it weren’t for the television news media infatuation with terror alerts. There’s nothing like curling up in front of the TV and watching the color-coordinated Parcheesi-board-like grid that invites one to assess the rising and falling degrees of terror in the daily forecast. It’s one thing to be aware, but repeatedly threatening the population with terror alerts is not helpful or educational, it’s annoying. No one has, as yet, clearly defined the purpose of the alerts. And then there’s that strange, but well-established, correlation between falling presidential ratings and increased terror alert levels ... hmmm.

And what would an election year be without a bunch of overblown, so-much-flash-so-little-substance stories about the candidates that do next to nothing to reveal, in any manner, who would actually make the best president? Was Kerry a hero? Was he a coward? Is he a flip-flopper? Did Bush show up for the National Guard? How much does he like golf? Is he stupid and inarticulate or
crafty and ambitious? Between Bush’s posturing, Kerry’s dullness, and Dean’s out and out weirdness, there was little room for honest critique or analysis:

The Dean Scream was unleashed in Iowa, marking the end of Howard Dean’s presidential campaign and according to ABC12.com the media covered it almost 700 times in just a few days. Granted, political leaders don’t normally produce the sound of a boar being skinned, but news organizations didn’t hesitate to squeeze it for all it was worth.

As John Kerry’s presidential campaign unraveled, none of the veterans that were with him on March 13, 1969 had any idea that their accounts of Kerry’s actions that day might determine America’s next president. The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth organization launched a series of claims against Kerry and the media slurped it up, broadcasting every detail from every interview. To this day it is unclear whether or not Kerry was the hero he claimed to be, but the tremendous news coverage of the dispute did nothing to illuminate how it would impact his ability to be a better or worse president than the incumbent.

When Bush, playing the hero, surprised the troops in Iraq, the media nipped again, just like a good lap dog. Bush’s handlers had constructed the perfect plan for the 2004 Thanksgiving holiday. Bush’s “disappearing act” was such a great topic for idle gossip that the mainstream just couldn’t resist—and the turkey presentation (plastic or not) was a deliciously heartwarming camera-ready conclusion.

By far, the most truly nauseating event of the 2004 campaign was the Dan Rather Bush-service-record “fiasco.” In the scramble to chastise Rather, 60 Minutes II, CBS (and anyone else who happened to be in the room) for the false service records, the U.S. media managed to ignore the fact the story was—actually—true. The veracity of the assertion, and the content, of the story had been established many years before, by a number of different journalists.7 (See chapter 15) But the mainstream has never let the facts stand in the way of a good story and “Memogate” has been called everything from the event that proves network media’s “liberal bias”8 to an
example of the “crisis of credibility” that plagues modern journalism.9

And finally, at number 10, is Secretary of State and former National Security Advisor Dr. Condoleezza Rice. Her education, her humble beginnings, and her recent promotion have stirred up a tremendous amount of publicity. Her incredible scholastic achievements gained her a legendary reputation at Stanford and the mainstream media seem quite taken by her attractiveness and her understated, yet elegant, sense of style.

But what about her career and her previous associations? Didn’t she used to work for an oil company? What about her role leading up to 9/11? Her evasive statements in interviews leave many analysts wondering about her veracity and how far she will to go to protect her cohorts. Her responses to interviews surrounding 9/11 have been questioned from the start. Many believe that she has lied or deliberately left out information on several accounts to preserve faith in the Bush Administration. About the briefing sent to the president that clearly stated an attack could involve airplanes, Condoleezza offered evasive statements like “I don’t think anybody could have predicted that they would try to use an airplane as a missile, a hijacked airplane as a missile.”10 (See chapter 4.)

The alleged abuse of children by a powerful individual, the need to know and understand our candidates and public officials, the plight and condition of our troops overseas—all are profound and valid issues for news coverage.

So why, when it comes to telling a story, does the mainstream news so often fixate on a couple of the trees and miss the forest entirely? Are they really so terrified of losing a little market share? Vision and a little courage have been known to attract viewers in the past (Laugh In, The Donahue Show, and All In The Family come to mind). A bit of a shake up at a network can be a good thing from time to time.

NOTES
1. Ron Kaufman “Advertising: Past, Present and Future,”

2. Andrew Gumbel “Courtroom Thriller as Fans Flock to the Michael Jackson Show,” The
   Independent (London), January 17, 2004,

3. Tom Rosenstiel, Carl Gottlieb, and Lee Ann Brady, “Quality Sells, But Commitment—and
   Viewership—Continue to Erode,” Journalism.org—Reports and Surveys, 2000,

4. Isabelle L. Horon, Ph.D.; Diana Cheng, M.D., “Enhanced Surveillance for Pregnancy-

5. George Rush and Joanna Molloy With Suzanne Rozdeba and Ben Widdicombe “Enquirer


   http://www.gregpalast.com/ulf/documents/draftdodgeblanked.jpg

8. Peter Johnson, “Rather’s ‘Memogate’: We told you so, conservatives say” USA TODAY,
   September 27, 2004.


10. James P. Pinkerton, “A rough day lies ahead for Rice,” Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN),