CHAPTER 3

Junk Food News and News Abuse

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Regular readers of Project Censored are familiar with our annual list of Junk Food News, in which Project volunteers and interns select a list of the dumbest, least important, most overplayed stories of the year. Project Censored founder Carl Jensen introduced the chapter as a response to charges from some in the mainstream media that the Top 25 Censored list was nothing more than a skewed interpretation of the journalism and editing process. After all, the news can’t print (or air) everything. Stories the Project referred to as “Censored,” they said, were simply those that had been set aside to make room for more deserving, consequential news.

So every year, Project Censored researchers scour the daily press outlets, hoping to find evidence that the news is so littered with deep, meaningful stories of great importance that they could not possibly have found the space (or time) to cover our “relatively inconsequential” top twenty-five. We have yet to find that evidence.

Junk Food News stories for Censored 2008:
1. Britney Spears has a meltdown
2. Anna Nicole has a baby
3. Brad Pitt & Angelina Jolie have a baby and adopt others
4. Jon Benet’s “killer” is found to be a fraud
5. The rise and fall of O.J. Simpson’s book
6. The feud between Donald Trump and Rosie O’Donnell
7. Miss USA Tara Conner’s drug abuse
8. Paul McCartney’s divorce
9. An astronaut wears a diaper to attack her romantic rival
10. Madonna adopts an African baby

Other nominations that didn’t make the final list include Lindsay Lohan’s stint in rehab, Prince Harry’s trip to Iraq, the Paris Hilton/Nicole Richie tussle, Paula Abdul’s drunk behavior on *American Idol*, *American Idol* contestant(s) in nudie pictures on the Internet, Hillary Clinton and violent video games, the Superbowl Mars Bar kiss between two men, Mayor Gavin Newsom’s affair with his aide’s wife, the Kate Hudson/Owen Wilson relationship, Cheney’s gay daughter has a baby, James Brown’s widow fights for inheritance, the “war” on Christmas and Easter, consumers camping out to get a PS3 game system, and the lawsuits against the movie *Borat*.

1. Moving up from number seven last year to number one on this year’s Junk Food list is the long-suffering paparazzi target Britney Spears. On February 17, Ms. Spears was photographed in a Los Angeles salon giving herself a buzz cut. The media (including the news media) went into frenzied overdrive, offering incessant speculation on why poor Britney might be coming unglued. While possibly important to thirteen-year-olds, adults might have preferred to hear about the newly released analysis of 2005 census figures showing that nearly 16 million Americans are currently living in deep or severe poverty. About one in three severely poor people are under age seventeen, and nearly two out of three are female.

Mainstream news anchors took the time to wonder if Ms. Spears was too young and immature for the pressures of motherhood. They weren’t able to squeeze in, however, the fact that female-headed families with children account for the lion’s share of the severely poor.

Perhaps even more troubling, during the week of February 17, 2007, TV news found little time to examine an appeals court ruling that bolstered the Bush Administration’s bid to hold prisoners indefinitely. The decision upheld part of a tough anti-terrorism law that took away the rights of Guantánamo prisoners to challenge their detention before federal judges.
2. On September 7, 2006, Anna Nicole Smith gave birth to a baby girl and everyone held their breath for the ultimate piece of the puzzle—who was the father? For those of you who missed it, the birth certificate listed none other than Anna Nicole’s personal attorney Howard K. Stern. Now, for those of you who kept up to date regarding the Anna Nicole goings-on, here’s what you did miss: A September 2006 report found that the Iraq violent death toll for August was three times larger than the preliminary count. The final tally disproved official US and Iraqi claims that a “security crackdown” had led to a drop in the number of deaths that month. At the same time, scientists in the arctic were warning of a new global warming “time bomb.” Glacier scientists found that the global warming gasses trapped in the permafrost were bubbling out in much larger amounts than anticipated and voiced concerns about what this likely indicated.

Sources


3. After the “Brangelina” roller coaster of 2005 and the frenzy of rumor and innuendo it sparked, hadn’t we heard enough about the private lives of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie? The answer, it would seem, was no. On May 27, 2006, the day of their baby Shiloh’s birth, the media went into paparazzi overdrive to obtain photos of
the “most beautiful baby in the world.” They weren’t as interested, however, in another set of photos released that day. These photos depicted US Marines killing Iraqi civilians “execution-style.” The unearthed photographs, taken by a Marine intelligence team, convinced military investigators that a single unit had killed as many as twenty-four unarmed Iraqis in an insurgent stronghold after a roadside bomb had killed an American in November of 2005. While this shocking story did eventually break the surface of mainstream coverage, it never attained the breadth of coverage so eagerly showered on Brad and Angelina.

Sources


4. On August 16, 2006, it was reported that officials had arrested a man by the name of John Marc Karr who was suspected in the infamous murder of Jon Benet Ramsey, the six-year-old pageant winner from Colorado. When Karr confidently proclaimed that, yes, he had indeed been involved in the crime, the national news media couldn’t get enough. Cable and network outlets spent the better part of two weeks obsessed with a story that in the end turned out to be a dead duck: DNA tests proved Karr wasn’t their man. So was this the best that network producers could find to report? As August is the height of the summer vacation season, the five million yearly visitors to our national parks might have been interested to hear a new report that a dozen of the most popular national parks are becoming increasingly susceptible to climate change. Mt. Rainier has more glacial ice than the rest of the Cascades combined and is among the best studied sites in the nation. Rainier’s glacier cover
shrank by more than a fifth from 1913 to 1994 and the volume of the glaciers by almost one-fourth, leaving scientists very concerned.

**Sources**


5. On November 15, 2006 O.J. Simpson returned, once again, to the spotlight, this time wearing sequins and tap shoes. Simpson announced that he was going to publish a novel posing the ‘hypothetical’ that if he did murder his wife and his wife’s friend then he would have done it in this way, or that way. The press had a field day—and so did the public. It wasn’t long before there was a TV movie to go along with the book. And then suddenly both were canceled. The publishers dismissed the idea as ill-contrived and family members of the victims moved into the spotlight. In the end, Simpson insisted that the book was written by a ghostwriter, and that he killed no one. Surprise.

Meanwhile, were we missing the bigger picture? During the O.J. Simpson reporting, President George Bush told his senior advisors that he wanted to send 20,000 more troops to Iraq instead of pulling troops out. The rest of his new plan would involve pursuing the diplomatic cooperation of nearby countries through international conferences or the like, reuniting the Shia and the Sunni by creating a magical political framework and allocating more resources to Iraq. The London *Guardian* made this known in November 2006. Funny how the mainstream news wasn’t able to pick up on this report until January 2007.

**Sources**

6. On December 20, 2006, Rosie O’Donnell criticized billionaire Donald Trump on The View after he told reporters that he would allow Miss USA, Tara Conner, to continue with her duties despite her violation of pageant guidelines (see JFN #7). O’Donnell went on to claim that Trump was not a good moral authority for young people in America. In response, Trump began a media blitz in which he called her several unflattering, and perhaps even defamatory, names. This prompted a media blitz that lasted for weeks. Every day mainstream news shows provided an “important update” to the ongoing feud.

One can only hypothesize the number of important, groundbreaking stories that might have emerged if not for the over-hyped, and ultimately boring, celebrity clash.

One that certainly received less attention than its due, was a shocking new study about the extreme discrepancies between the world’s wealthiest and the poorest. According to a newly updated study released by the Helsinki-based World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University, the richest two percent of adults in the world now own more than half the world’s wealth (up from 5 percent just three years ago). By contrast, the assets of half of the world’s adult population account for barely 1 percent of global wealth. The study’s authors say their work is the most comprehensive study of personal wealth ever undertaken.

**Sources**


7. On December 16, 2006, it was reported that the reigning Miss USA, Tara Connor from Brussel Springs, Kentucky, was under scrutiny from the Miss USA pageant because of published reports of underage drinking, cocaine use, and allegations of sexual escapades. As America wondered if she would keep her crown or be forced to resign in disgrace, the mainstream media failed to pick up on a startling Associated Press report that hundreds of prisoners have been transferred from Guantánamo Bay to other countries, and then set free. The prisoners had been arrested during the nationwide sweep that took place after 9/11. Donald Rumsfeld labeled them as “among the most dangerous, best-trained, vicious killers on the face of the Earth.” The decision to suddenly release so many of the former detainees raised questions about whether they were really as dangerous as the United States claimed. Either that or some of America’s staunchest allies in the “War on Terror” had suddenly decided to set hundreds of terrorists and militants free.

Sources


8. On May 17, 2006 Heather Mills and Paul McCartney announced their impending separation, just prior to Paul’s sixty-fourth birthday. It was announced via the couple’s Web sites that the two were to separate. If media speculation in the weeks prior to this had been intense, it was ten-fold after the announcement.

The following day, television news outlets missed two stories that may have been slightly more important to the daily lives of the American public. First, the New York Times announced that the Bush administration was planning to solve the US/Mexican border problem by privatizing border control. They have begun providing huge subsidies to their cronies at Raytheon and Lockheed Martin to
do less work for more money (so much for the efficiency of private enterprise). Second, according to Canada’s National Farmer’s Union, global food supplies are near the breaking point. Rising population, water shortages, climate change, and the growing costs of fossil fuel-based fertilizers point to a calamitous shortfall in the world’s grain supplies in the near future.

Sources


9. On Feb. 5, 2007, United States Navy Capt. Lisa Nowak, the famously diaper-clad astronaut, was arrested in Florida and charged with, among other things, attempted murder, attempted kidnapping, burglary, and battery. This sparked a free-for-all during which the mainstream media covered every minute detail of the astronaut’s life and loves. It certainly beat out the trial of First Lt. Ehren Watada, the US soldier who refused to go to Iraq, that began the same day that Nowak was arrested. Watada’s decision to battle the military system rather than the people of Iraq received virtually no notice from the mainstream television and press outlets.

Sources


Tomas Alex Tizon, “Instead of Iraq, a Battle All His Own,” Los Angeles Times, February 5, 2007.

10. On October 11, 2006, it was reported that pop star Madonna had adopted a one-year-old boy in Malawi. Madonna said she hoped to highlight the problem of AIDS in the southern African nation.
Controversy erupted four days later when the boy’s father said he had felt confused and powerless in the face of the singer’s determination to take his only surviving child, whose mother had passed away.

Of less concern that week was a new national poll revealing people’s attitudes toward the challenges facing modern families. According to the survey, Americans said that they are anxious about the forces that threaten family. Americans point to divorce as the biggest challenge to stable family life today, rising above other factors such as same sex or dual career couples. According to the new data, 88 percent of US adults say divorce has negative impacts on maintaining a stable American family life. Only 53 percent said that same sex couples were a negative impact and only 50 percent said dual career households negatively impact families.

**Sources**


Angella Johnson, “Madonna’s adopted baby’s father tells how he was powerless to stop her,” *The Daily Mail*, October 15, 2006.


**NEWS ABUSE**

In 2001, addressing concerns that some of the stories overplayed in the media could not appropriately be called Junk Food, Project Censored writers added a list of stories we call News Abuse—potentially valid news stories that eventually consumed more space and air time than their importance would seem to warrant.
The News Abuse stories for 2008:
1. Death of Anna Nicole Smith
2. Death of Steve Irwin
3. Mel Gibson’s drunken rant
4. Duke University lacrosse team’s alleged involvement in a rape
5. Michael Richards’s racist comments

1. In the early afternoon of February 8, 2006, the tabloid it-girl Anna Nicole Smith was found unresponsive in her hotel room, rushed to the hospital, and pronounced DOA at 2:49 pm. During that same week, the former US Ambassador of Iraq failed to explain what happened to $12 billion in newly printed, shrink-wrapped $100 bills that he had flown to Baghdad, and had since misplaced. Also on that day, Iran’s top authority said that the Islamic Republic would target “US interests around the world” if its nuclear program was challenged. Iran’s leader reminded all listening that “The enemies know well that any aggression will lead to a reaction from all sides in the Iranian nation on the aggressors and their interests around the world.”

Sources


2. The death of crocodile hunter Steve Irwin took over news on September 4, 2006. The icon of wildlife adventurers was reportedly taping a new documentary off of the Australian north coast, when a stingray that he was swimming with stung him right in the heart.

While the US obsessed over the loss of the Crocodile Hunter—his death, his death tape and his documentary—news outlets neglected to tell us that China had begun working on a nuclear deal with Pakistan. So what’s the big deal that Pakistan, sworn enemy of India (who by the way is getting nuclear weapons from the US), is getting
nuclear power from the China National Nuclear Corporation? So Pakistan is becoming more powerful and China is in the nuclear trading business. No big deal. Nothing bad will come of it.

Source

3. On July 28, 2006 Mel Gibson was arrested for speeding down the Pacific Coast Highway in a drunken haze. Described as cooperative until arrested, Gibson then became threatening, shouting anti-Semitic remarks and asking “Are you a Jew?” to the arresting officer (who is in fact, Jewish). The incident sparked an almost immediate media hubbub, prompting two separate public apologies from Gibson.

Ironically, mainstream media outlets spent that weekend studiously ignoring all but the most banal stories following the Israeli attack on Lebanon. They neglected to mention reports from AP and the Guardian that sixty people, including thirty-four children, had been killed during an Israeli attack on Qana. Widely publicized throughout Europe, Americans were ignorant of the fact that the death toll in Lebanon was as much as twice the official figure reported in the US. Prior to the attack, Israeli commanders had announced, “If You Haven’t Left, we will consider you Hezbollah.” According to the London Guardian, global outrage called the Qana attack a “War Crime” by Israel. US rearming flights, headed for Israel, were forced to avoid a Scottish Airport after being denied entry by local authorities. Another report highlighted the fragility of the ecosystem in Lebanon, calling Lebanon’s trees, air, and sea “Casualties of War.”

Sources
Dahr Jamail, “Death Toll Could Be Twice the Official Figure,” Inter Press Service, July 28, 2006.


4. On April 11, 2007, the North Carolina Attorney General announced that all charges against the three lacrosse players charged with rape in 2006 had been dropped. The obviously weary Duke University students said they were looking forward to leaving the entire incident behind them. But this was not to be. The dropping of the charges produced perhaps as large a media firestorm as had the original charges. Cable and network news shows worked feverishly to beat each other out for the most “in-depth” and “hard-hitting” interviews.

It is interesting to note that on that same day, April 11, 2007, the research database LexisNexis and Information Analytics Group launched their new software, AIS—Advanced Investigative Solutions—designed to help law enforcement “locate and monitor non-compliant sexual predators.” The new software enables investigators to more quickly respond to child abductions and supports law enforcement agencies with their efforts to enforce the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, which mandates strict registration requirements for sex offenders. The AIS “leverages critical information, link analysis, mapping and alerts needed to rapidly identify and locate sexual predators.” More than 6,000 federal, state, and local government and law enforcement agencies have already begun using its investigative solutions every day to locate suspects, track down fugitives, and solve crimes.

**Sources**


5. On November 20, 2006 actor Michael Richards let loose on a couple of so-called hecklers in the audience of one of his stand-up comedy shows. He shouted racist remarks at them, including the N-word, and said that in the past they would have been “hanging from a tree” by now. This not-so-funny outburst made headlines across the United States, labeling Richards (or as we all know him, Kramer from *Seinfeld*) to be a racist. His garbled and unconvincing apology on the Letterman show did little to assuage the situation. While the incident caused a small flurry of mainstream debate on the “state of racism in America,” the coverage was, for the most part, shallow and disingenuous.

During this time there was a meaningful protest in Indonesia that was almost completely ignored. The Indonesian people protested the arrival of George W. Bush, his presence there and his war against terrorism—with 2,000 marching to show their disdain for the Bush administration, its practices, and its war in Iraq. The normally peaceful resort town was turned into a military state by the US-backed autocratic government.

**Source**