

# Infotainment

by Bill Herbst

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*"After the break, we have a news story you won't want to miss, so stay tuned."*

This message, or one essentially like it, is delivered many times each day by the so-called news anchors on MSNBC, with smiles, but no irony at all. I presume the same is true of all the major corporate-owned media channels that specialize in 24/7 news coverage.

Did Edward Murrow ever offer such an obvious and crude sales pitch to keep viewers eyes glued to the TV? Did Walter Cronkite? Huntley and Brinkley? Not that I remember. But then, that was in an earlier time, long before Ted Turner invented 24/7 news by launching CNN, back when the News Divisions of major networks were still separate from and funded by the profit-making Entertainment Divisions, and when print journalism in newspapers and magazines still had a piece of the action. Now, of course, the percentage of the public that reads newspapers has shrunk precipitously. The great unwashed masses (i.e., us) *watch* the news on their televisions, tablets, and smart phones.

No, reading isn't dead yet. In fact, many people still buy and read books, both fiction and non-fiction, and the publishing industry still survives, although corporate consolidation has forced out all but a few independent bookstores. Published authors now comprise an even more exclusive club than in the past. The longstanding dream of a viable career as a writer of books has faded. If you're not successful, privileged, and well-connected, your chances of earning a livelihood as a published author are very, very slim, akin to the odds of becoming a movie star. On the other hand, the internet has had a democratizing effect on writing. Few can publish real books, but darn near anyone can post online.

What's happened in America in the mainstream media is that the line between news (i.e., journalism) and entertainment has been removed — not merely blurred, but erased entirely. News has been conscripted into the holy army of the Church of Corporate Profit.

News and entertainment have merged into infotainment.

This doesn't mean that the news presented on the major networks — CNN, MSNBC, PBS, and Fox — is "fake." The actual reporting is still, for the most part,

factual, at least in the most limited sense. But each network has a characteristic "slant" that emphasizes certain kinds of news events and stories over others, and which promotes a specific worldview. By slant, I mean the editorial decisions about which news gets reported, the distribution of how much coverage (in air time) certain stories receive, and the general tone of presentation in each story. An attentive viewer of any of the mainstream news media networks can accurately gauge all these characteristics and predict what they'll see. That's mysterious and cloaked only for viewers who believe the illusion of "objective" news reporting.

This is not an issue of fairness, balance, or neutrality — it's not about giving equal time to all sides of a debate. No, it's about packaging the news as a overall narrative, with a subtle or overt story arc that presents itself as reality. All news, whether reported from the center or the fringes, is offered by people who have particular agendas. That's not to suggest that everyone is lying, but knowing the agenda is critical if we are to be well-informed adults rather than children believing fairy tales.

In itself, biased narratives are not a recent development. Mainstream news has always been slanted, and too often in our history the news has been partially or even completely false. Remember the Maine? The Spanish-American War of 1898 was effectively created by the belligerent, outraged jingoism of Hearst newspapers, whose yellow journalism whipped acquiescent Americans into a frenzy. The Vietnam War was dramatically accelerated in 1964 by premature and incorrect reporting about the Gulf of Tonkin incident. These are, of course, conspicuous and egregious examples of falsehood and fiction masquerading as news. But most mainstream news in America over the 20th century was slanted, filtered through the prevailing cultural and political memes in America of "*Capitalism good, Communism bad.*" Any more nuanced discussion than that was confined to the outer wings of the bell curve.

Today is different for number of reasons, each of which is significant. Discussing them all would require a book, and I am neither qualified for that task nor in the club of authors who could get such a book published. I write and post short commentaries, so I'll focus here on only the single issue that aggravates me most, the one to which I alluded at the beginning of this Commentary.

News is now a profit-driven commodity, like everything in an America driven by late-stage market capitalism. The News is gathered, packaged, and presented as entertainment.

In the 1980s, I began asking a question: *What is the product of television?* The apparent answer — the one most people gave without thinking — was television shows. But that's not the correct answer. The shows on television are like the fisherman's rods and reels or nets. They are only the means to an end. The actual *product* of television is viewers, which are then sold to advertisers.

The more eyeballs TV can capture and hold, the more can be charges for advertising, and the more money can be made. So, the product of television, as well as the goal, is to keep viewers glued to the screen, because that's what garners the profits for those who own and run the networks. This is the motive behind all visual media, to keep viewers glued to their screens — entertained, pacified, and passive.

Mainstream news in America has always been slanted toward the prevailing power elites, but now it's also devolved into just another in the endless and infinite money-making schemes of corporate America. Any talk of serving the public good is mere lip-service. It's all about the money, baby.

While turning off the television and retiring the smart phone might be worth considering, few of us will do that. We'll continue to watch "the news," but, at the very least, we should constantly remind ourselves that it's a show, presented for the financial benefit of those who own the media.

OK, I get it. "News" and the journalism that reports it are not primarily about serious policy discussion, nor about ways we might change to avoid or minimize the tragically dystopian future toward which humanity and civilization are now hurtling. The major issues of our times — catastrophic climate change, nuclear war, racism, economic systems, wealth inequality, our relationship with nature, and the collective consciousness of humanity — command precious little weight in news reporting. The news media never has and never will address any of those challenges, except in the most superficial ways, which these days means for about 15 seconds at a time.

Still, I think our chances of survival and creation of a world with less suffering would be at least slightly improved if we presented the news without sullyng it into infotainment. As long as corporations are driven *only* by profit, the odds remain very slim.