

Infotainment II

by Bill Herbst

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Note: This Commentary is titled "Infotainment II" (rather than just "Infotainment") because that was the title of an earlier Commentary of mine posted on January 8th, 2019. This piece is essentially a rehash of that same theme two years further down the road. In an odd synchronicity, that post in 2019 was Commentary #128. Since then, I've posted exactly 128 more of these short essays. Is that meaningful? Probably not, but I notice stuff like that. The world has turned on its axis 904 times since then, and numerous changes have occurred in society, but renewed sanity is not among them. And one among many reasons for that sorry state of affairs is Infotainment.

I consider this subject to be worthy of repeated visits, multiple examinations, and renewed airings. Heck, I may turn this topic into a Franchise of Endless Sequels, my version of the Rocky, Rambo, Star Trek/Star Wars, or Godfather series of movies. Heck, the Fast and Furious franchise is up to nine movies. If Hollywood can do it, why can't I? Perhaps this sophomore installment of "Infotainment II" will be followed in two more years by "Infotainment III," then by "Infotainment: The Return" or "Infotainment: The Final Chapter." At that point, I'll be able to repackage the whole series as "The Infotainment Saga." Ah, the wonders of marketing in its endless-but-not-so-creative permutations. Anyway, on with the show...

Recently, Tucker Carson and Fox News were sued for defamation by former Playboy model Karen McDougal, who alleged that Carlson slandered her during a December 2018 episode of his show, "*Tucker Carlson Tonight*." Fox's lawyers asked the judge to throw out the suit, arguing that no "reasonable viewer" would take seriously anything Tucker Carlson said. The judge agreed, and the suit was dismissed.

What matters in this (and why it was a big deal) is that Fox's "legal defense" was effectively a corporate admission that Tucker Carlson is not a bona fide journalist (my term, not theirs...), that he doesn't report facts or objective news, but rather offers up merely his opinions. In short, according to Fox's lawyers and the judge, Tucker Carlson's show is designed and meant to be *entertainment* — only entertainment, and nothing more than entertainment. Unfortunately, this is really not an admission at all, but just a new lie to replace the original lie. What the lawyers actually mean by the word entertainment is *propaganda*, but that wouldn't look good in court.

Tucker Carlson is not just some drunk sitting on a barstool in a local tavern spouting his opinions to anyone in the bar within earshot. No, he's a media figurehead (as are all the talking heads of every network, as well as the "expert panels" routinely assembled to interpret the meaning of the news for us idiot viewers), and that gives him the imprimatur of "authority." In addition, Carlson is a celebrity in a culture that worships celebrity. This is why companies hire celebrities to market their products, because Americans think they know celebrities and trust them. Any snake oil endorsed by a celebrity sells more.

This past week, a similar defamation case against Rachel Maddow and MSNBC went almost exactly the same route. Maddow was sued by One America News (OAN), a hard-right media channel. Maddow had stated on her nightly program on MSNBC that OAN was "*the most obsequiously pro-Trump right-wing news outlet in America*" and "*really literally is paid Russian propaganda.*" To win the case, MSNBC's lawyers felt compelled to resort to the same tactic employed by Fox's lawyers in defending the defamation lawsuit against Tucker Carlson, by claiming (and thus admitting) that Maddow's nightly show is not objective journalism at all, just entertainment.

Well, duh. Whether we're talking about newspapers and magazines, network TV "news" programs, cable "news" networks, or social media, what passes for popular journalism in America has always been an unhealthy (and untruthful) mix of factual news, entertainment, and propaganda meant to sway public opinion in whatever direction desired by the particular institution behind that "news" delivery.

At the turn of the 20th century, William Randolph Hearst used his national chain of newspapers to gin up an American war in Cuba against Spain. Months of spectacular, hysterical, jingoistic coverage in Hearst publications about Spain's supposedly horrible transgressions, marked by battle cry headlines screaming "Remember the Maine!" succeeded in generating war fever among the American public. As a result (I would suggest *directly* as a result), that war actually happened and was a significant event in the global expansion of the American Empire.

In 1964, a fictional "incident" in the Gulf of Tonkin purportedly involving the American gunboat USS Maddox and North Vietnam's Navy was dutifully reported by the mainstream news media as fact, when it was a lie. The result was a Congressional Resolution that led to a dramatic escalation of the war in Vietnam. Of course, the outcome of that manipulation didn't play out as happily for us.

The same occurred in 2003 with the "Yellow Cake Uranium" episode and Weapons of Mass Destruction debacle, which aimed to convince Americans that Saddam Hussein was a serious threat to the U.S. The invasion of Iraq was manufactured on wholly false pretenses and justified by outrageous lies.

The news media was not merely complicit in all this, but all too willing to cheerlead for the invasion by pretending that the lies were facts, and reporting them as if they were true. Of course, like Vietnam, that war didn't end well either, but no matter. Even lost or pointless wars are great for the military-industrial complex, which doesn't need victories, just paydays.

What I find maybe not quite disturbing, but very telling, about the Carlson and Maddow defamation lawsuits is that the lawyers on both sides argued that no "reasonable viewer" would believe the bogus claims of their respective hosts, and the judges in both cases actually went along with those bullshit arguments, essentially confirming a ridiculous view of the American public's sophistication. What country do these people live in? Can it be possible that they do not realize how completely gullible Americans are? How can they imagine that viewers rationally assess what they see and hear, rather than selecting the infotainment they watch to confirm their pre-existing beliefs, slants, and biases?

OK, let me refine what I mean by gullibility. Yes, the American public is gullible as hell, but only in the beginning, when their brains are still unformed mush. Once convinced (one might say "programmed") about any given set of beliefs or assumptions, Americans' brains harden into concrete, and gullibility ends. They morph from gullible to quite savvy in choosing whatever information sources will reinforce their well-cooked beliefs.

Honest and thoughtful debate in this country over issues is nearly non-existent, because almost no one cares about any view other than the ones they believe. Members of different camps aren't interested in considering that the other side's perceptions or proposals might have any validity at all. So, gullibility is replaced by dogma — knee-jerk, absolute, black-and-white, my-team-is-right-and-your-team-is-not-only-wrong-but-fucked-and-evil.

Tucker Carlson's audience relishes his lies, as does Rachel Maddow's audience. They are each cheerleaders for points of view that are called "centrist" but are actually quite extreme in the Us-versus-Them dynamic that has taken over our culture and politics. Each host is paid an absurd amount of money to wave the pom-poms for their respective team.

As I've stated over and over, the great triumph of 20th-century psychology was not in the arena of psychotherapy and mental health. Not even close. Instead, psychology's most stunning success was in marketing and public relations — specifically, the art and science of manipulating opinion to manufacture consent. Basically, we're talking about mind control, but not in the silly way presented in all those Cold War anti-commie movies, such as *The Manchurian Candidate*, with its ooga-booga brainwashing through magical hypnosis. No, what modern infotainment practices is the real science of mind control.

Among the most serious failings of the cultural/political Left in America is the tendency to make its case through rational arguments. This will never work in a country like America. The Right understands very well that selling their worldview to the public is best achieved by appealing to root emotions — fear and greed. Sometimes those emotional manipulations are cloaked in presumably rational arguments, but not always. And even when the appeals are made to appear rational or practical, they're often not. Since the Right is interested in only one thing — winning — truth doesn't matter. Many of those on the Right are perfectly comfortable with lying their asses off. Sometimes they don't even know they're lying, but they don't really care. As I say, once the gullible mind has been shaped, reason goes out the window. Debates and arguments become bogus. Emotional appeals and lies win, and those are the favorite soft tactics of demagogues and authoritarians.

There is no viable Left in the U.S. anymore, and hasn't been for more than half a century. Put in the simplest possible terms, the Right has won. And a significant factor in that pyrrhic victory is infotainment.

My guess is that about 98% of the media landscape — what we see on our screens — is now pure, escapist entertainment, consumer marketing through overt advertising, or manipulative propaganda. We may call it "virtual reality," but it's not reality at all.

A culture cannot survive on illusions alone. Fantasies may keep us afloat for quite awhile, but not forever. How much reality is required to sustain us can be argued. Human beings have been around for a couple hundred thousand years, and we've never been particularly good at distinguishing reality from illusion. And civilization — which was built on illusions — has lasted for 12,000 years so far. Without sufficient grounding in dependable truth, however, even a shared consensus is ultimately a chimera.

Infotainment is evidence of the dwindling reality within American life. Not that reality was ever in the lead in this country. It always trailed illusions, dreams, and lies by a considerable span. Now, though, that gap is widening as our illusions gain momentum, pull away, and sprint down the back stretch toward the finish line.

I don't claim to know what the "finish line" will look like. Maybe it won't be a "finish" at all. Judging from where we are now, though, my concern is that wherever we're headed and however it will look when we get there probably won't be pretty.