The Real ‘Fake News’ Crisis

The secret of Donald Trump’s political success rests largely on his experience with the fake reality of “reality TV” via “The Celebrity Apprentice” — and how fake drama has spilled into political “news,” as JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

Everything you need to know about “fake news” happened on July 19, 2017. That was the day the media stopped in its tracks and turned like well-coiffed, bronzer-addicted lemmings to collectively hurtle themselves into the abyss of infotainment. It was a truly telling moment because they actually had to hit the pause button on the morphine drip of TrumpTV to carry the live feed of O.J. Simpson’s piddling parole hearing in a Nevada conference room.

Amazingly — or, perhaps, predictably — this utterly inconsequential event was carried by CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, MSNBC, FOX News and ESPN. That’s right, this scandalous ghost of obsessions past received the same treatment as a spectacular terrorist attack or a deadly hurricane or a political assassination.

But, no ... it was just O.J. pandering to a parole board. As expected, he was granted his release for a crime unrelated to the famous murders, troubled investigation and showy trial that made him America’s first news-cycle superstar. And it provided a strangely poetic full-circle moment for the media.

When the Juice squeezed out the omnipresent President, it was like he’d come back for a ceremonial handoff to the new star runner before he ambled down the field into the opposition’s broken coverage. This interruption in our regularly scheduled programming also confirmed something Trump has made central to his media-fueled rise as America’s first full-fledged celebritician. That’s right folks, President Trump is actually right about something ... CNN and much of the news media is, in fact, “fake news.”

The problem is that he’s right for the wrong reason. He wants you to believe fake news is part of a Deep State plot to keep him from Draining the Swamp™ and because the media doesn’t want him to Make America Great Again™. According to Trump, that’s why the “fake news” media — as embodied by CNN — is churning out fallacious stories. It’s supposed to explain away the obsessive coverage of Russia-gate, dismiss his impressive array of self-inflicted wounds and account for the media’s petulant refusal to tout his “historic” number of as yet undetermined accomplishments. It’s a self-serving — if understandable — fiction Trump sells with his unique brand with reality showmanship.
The Real Fake News

But the true story of fake news is at once far more banal and yet ultimately just as pernicious as Trump’s fake news boogeyman. Sorry, Donald … the problem is not that the news is a bunch of made-up lies or salacious slanders cut from whole cloth. Nor is it a conduit for some nefarious political agenda. Their primary motive is the most All-American motive of all … it’s the profit motive.

Look no further than their bottom line since becoming Trump’s bête noire. The ratings, revenue and executive compensation … are all up. Frankly, CNN and MSNBC were mired in a crisis before the Trump came down the elevator of Trump Tower in June of 2015. And the New York Times and Washington Post were battling their own declining readership and relevance. But that was then. And this is now.

And now they’ve got their own bête noire in Trump … a walking, talking tabloid complete with salacious headlines, wild accusations, shady connections and a willingness to say anything so long as it keeps him on the tips of the media’s wagging tongues. Trump mastered the art of the headline-friendly spiel in the hurly-burly of New York’s tabloid-driven media marketplace. And he knew how to stay on the front page, even if it meant pretending to be his own press agent. By the time he’d done a reality show and peddled the racially-tinged tripe that Barack Obama was an African interloper, Trump had also mastered the art of dealing with the infotainment-driven national news media.

And in a plot twist befitting the side-show state of American politics, it turns out that fake newsiness is also one of the main reasons he became president in the first place. The media’s addiction to cheap and easy, scandal-driven coverage perfectly fit Trump’s one-man circus act. And they forked over the $5 billion in free media coverage to prove it.

Distrusted And Unverified

Now, that’s not to say the news media hasn’t repeatedly taken refuge behind a wall of willful ignorance or told lies of both omission and commission. This has been particularly true whenever Uncle Sam spoils for war with yet another enemy. It’s been that way since the start of the Cold War (and even earlier), but the lead-up to the “product launch” also-known-as “The Iraq War” remains an all-time low for the mainstream news media … with Knight-Ridder’s real-time
debunking of Saddam’s ominous aluminum tubes as the heroic exception that proved the rule.

By 2003, “Mission Accomplished” had devolved into a rolling catastrophe of roadside bombings, suicide attacks and what would become the Abu Ghraib torture scandal. Not coincidentally, 2003 was the Rubicon moment when the percentage of Americans with a “great deal or fair amount of trust in the media” finally dropped below 50%, according to Gallup’s tracking poll. Since then the media has battled Congress for the ignominious title of America’s least liked and least trusted institution.

Given that turning point, it’s probably not coincidental that Trump’s campaign took off when he attacked Jeb Bush as the catch-all proxy for the Iraq debacle. The media’s complicity in the snipe hunt for WMDs widened a trust gap that may never be fully repaired ... and Trump exploited that rift to great effect, both on a hapless Jeb and on the ever-present media that Trump turned into a de facto political opponent.

Diving Deeper

However, Gallup’s tracking poll also shows that the GOP’s loss of faith dates back beyond the Iraq War ... to the middle of the Clinton years. It makes sense that the last time a majority of Republicans trusted the media was during the daily feeding frenzy right before the GOP’s failed attempt at impeachment. To wit, Republican trust hit a partisan high point of 52 percent in 1998. But it’s been a deep decline in trust for Republicans ever since. No doubt, the crashing and burning of the Bush Administration after Hurricane Katrina didn’t quite recapture their trust.

The daily media drumbeat again targets a Republican and overall confidence in the media is slowly rising. But “slowly” is the operative word ... with newspapers up to 27 percent from a low of 20 percent in 2016 and television up to 24 percent from a low of 18 percent in 2014. That’s an aggregate number that includes Democrats and Independents (although it’s likely that the modest rise represents Democrats who appreciate the media’s daily bashing of Trump).

For Trump, the important number is the 89 percent of Republicans who trust him versus just 9 percent who trust CNN. They’ve been primed for his fake news attack on the media for a long time. As Jonathan Marshall recently detailed, there’s been a long-standing, concerted effort by right-wing activists to discredit news organizations under the bias-laden rubric of “The Liberal Media.” It began in the Nixon years and it was designed to produce miasmas of doubt around a host of issues and scandals.
Trump cranked-up that fog machine to create a self-serving narrative of “fake news.” It allows Trump to cast shadows of doubt on each and every damaging story by dismissing them all as the equivalent of aluminum tubes and mushroom clouds. But, like so many of Trump’s misdirections, that’s not really the problem. The issue is not that the “news” is a bunch of made-up lies or salacious slanders (although there is surely some of that). The true story of fake news is all about overhead.

It’s News To Them

Sadly, the truth is that much of the news that fills the 24-hour cycle simply isn’t newsworthy … and a lot of it really isn’t even news at all. It is mostly a serialized soap opera. It is personality-driven drivel. And it is rarely original reporting based on actual news gathered from around the United States or, even less so, from the far corners of the world.

Instead, the news gathering business has become little more than a news blathering business – with a teeming mass of in-studio experts, commentators, surrogates and columnists poised to chime-in on the latest installment of the ongoing drama du jour. It is like watching a perpetual Bachelorette after-party show where contestants – in this case, pundits – sit down to chew over the machinations of tonight’s shocking episode.

But don’t laugh. There is a really good reason why the Bachelor/Bachelorette franchise has notched a combined 28 seasons. The unavoidable truth is that it works. It’s an easy formula to replicate. And it’s profitable. That’s why television is brimming with reality shows … they’re cheap, easy to produce and people watch ‘em.

And that formula also explains why today’s cable news landscape is largely bereft of hard news. The blatherati-centric style of “news” is cheap, easy to produce and people watch it. Turn on any of the big three (CNN, FOX & MSNBC) and you’ll find actual reporting makes up a tiny fraction of what you might see on a given day.

You’ll find very few first-person reports by journalists in the field. And most stories are simply regurgitated newspaper reports the hosts toss over to blatherati trapped in Brady Bunch boxes. They tell us what they think and, if the producer is lucky, they’ll “make news” by calling out one of their colleagues in a viral moment of righteous anger. Much of what they talk about is what politicians say to permanent reporters stationed on Capitol Hill. Very little of it is actual news.

On some days, there is no original reporting at all. Genuine investigative
reporting is rarer than a solar eclipse and “breaking news” stories from outside the Beltway are only likely to penetrate that rare air inside the news bubble if the word “terror” fortuitously intersects with an American or European locale. If the bomb goes off in Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan? Not so much.

**Milking Disasters**

But if a natural disaster or mass shooting happens inside the U.S., they will go … and go in force. Then they will milk it for all it’s worth. All the reporters they deploy and stringers and satellite trucks they hire are a sunk cost, after all. So, why not get all they can out of it?

Hour upon hour is devoted to coverage, whether or not they are advancing the story. The rest of the world fades away as experts and commentators pore over every detail and the same bits of video loop over and over again. Whole news cycles get gobbled up with this paint-by-number style of news programming. It really programs itself. Editorial decision-making is a breeze when there is only one story to cover … be it Charlottesville, Hurricane Harvey or Donald Trump tweeting out the day’s agenda before they sip their first cup of coffee.

What you don’t see are one-to-three-minute-long video “packages” edited from originally shot video in places were stuff is actually happening. That’s the kind of high-overhead reporting that requires a news organization to deploy reporters, producers and camera crews out into “the field” … a.k.a. “the world.”

It’s the kind of thing you can still find if you get BBC World on your cable or satellite system. On a good day, the BBC can give you eight packages on eight stories from eight different countries in 15 minutes. Sometimes it is less because they might actually go live to one of the many dozens of reporters they’ve deployed around the world. This allows them to report from the scene of an ongoing crisis or break news from nearly every part of the globe. And this is the sort of reporting CNN used to do in its heyday … before the TimeWarnerAOL merger eroded what remained of Ted Turner’s dream of a globe-spanning network that could report from just about anywhere in real time.

**The Way It Was**

Back in the 1990s, when CNN was riding high after its on-the-spot coverage of the Gulf War, it had reporters deployed around the globe in bureaus big and small. Mike Chinoy reported regularly from China, Charlayne Hunter-Gault reported regularly from Johannesburg, and Lucia Newman reported around Latin America, often deployed from Havana. And every Sunday, CNN devoted two hours to a long-since-defunct show called “World Report” that compiled video packages from local news sources around the world … ranging from Madagascar to Benin,
from Bolivia to Finland and Belarus.

But sadly, that model was already in trouble by the time every network and cable news channel cut to the live feed of O.J. driving his white Bronco down a Los Angeles freeway. The most important factor was the rise of “news divisions” as profit centers for the mega-corporations that owned them. To get there, the key was to find ways to grab eyeballs while also lowering overhead. Reporters and camera crews in bureaus around the world and, perhaps even more distressingly, around the United States were costly investments that drained profitability away from the bottom line. Sure, the packages they delivered were crucial to filling the day’s schedule, but cutting the cost of labor is always a tempting step for corporate number crunchers.

The solution to this problem came in two parts. One was the advent of “Crossfire” on CNN. The idea of filling a slot with two hosts and two walk-ons who only wanted a shot at making their names as political celebrities was programming gold. It was loud, contentious and often dramatic. And it was cheap, easy and profitable.

The second part was the rise of the serialized scandal. In some ways, the Gulf War portended the future. The daily build-up to war provided an irresistible plotline. Still, in spite of the Pentagon’s attempts to pool coverage, manage the narrative with snazzy videos of self-guiding bombs and the coming of expert Generals as commentators, the Gulf War was news. It was not a scandal, per se. The end of newsgathering began in earnest when O.J. Simpson was cast as the star of the ultimate courtroom drama.

The Juice Machine

The story arc played out over the course of 16 months and each day saw CNN parsing the details of the day’s events, particularly as the trial began in earnest in September of 1994. It was the endless chattering about O.J.’s trial that gave us the rise of the blathering class. Greta Van Susteren became a star and she has since hit the trifecta — having worked at CNN, FOX News and MSNBC. By the time the verdict came in on October 3, 1995, the die was cast.

The following year — timed nicely with the corporate-friendly Telcommunications Act of 1996 — saw the launch of FOX News and the beginning of the celebrity-branded “news” show with the coming of Bill O’Reilly. It was as if Roger Ailes had a premonition of things to come. The format was set and then replicated and “refined” with the Clinton-Lewinsky Impeachment saga. It was the gift that kept on giving. Even more so than O.J., the “Devil On A Blue Dress” storyline finished the transformation of the cable news model away from gathering news and towards constant blathering about the news and the celebification of politics.
It was a smooth transition to Elian Gonzales. Then came Bush v. Gore with its episc recount and infamous “hanging chads.” After that came 9/11, the Iraq War build-up, the brutal years of war, the catastrophe of Katrina, and the Sandy Hook tragedy and so on. And that’s what TrumpTV is for cable news ... another serialized plotline of daily drama often ripped from the headlines that cable news incessantly ponders. Rarely do they break news. Mostly they “confirm” the work of others with their “own sources.” Then they talk about it.

Lemming Meringue

If television news ever decided to forgo the low overhead and once again send reporters and producers and videographers out into the world beyond the semi-permeable bubble of D.C.-N.Y. axis, these teams could do the one thing that only television can do ... and that’s go to a story where it is happening to “gather” the news and the sound and the pictures and send it right into people’s living rooms.

It’s the unique power of words and pictures working together to transport people to places they might never otherwise see and to hear from people they might never otherwise meet. It’s the kind of reporting that provides context to complicated issues and generates knowledge, understanding and maybe even a little empathy for someone outside of one’s own experience. And it’s the kind of power that Edward R. Murrow implored his colleagues to cherish back in 1958 when he warned them that their callow interests risked turning their miraculous opportunity into little more than “lights in a box.”

Pictures and reporting still matter. And one wonders how Americans would respond if they saw reports from Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Mali or anywhere the U.S. military is active and people are dying. Maybe it wouldn’t make a difference, but at least Americans could decide for themselves. As it stands now, there is almost no input, no information nor anything that shows America’s wide array of targets as human beings with lives and families and burnt-out homes.

Really, this is the true fakery. It’s the mind-numbing bubble the news media created. It’s a semi-permeable barrier that has become what Murrow feared ... a shiny object designed to grab eyeballs, drive revenue and enrich the media moguls whose massive compensation packages rise with the ratings and the revenue.

That’s the bottom line. The lemmings in the media who cut to O.J.’s parole hearing believe they are giving the lemmings in the audience what they want. And the ratings say they are right. But in another ironic plot twist the oft-recited story of lemmings throwing themselves over a cliff is ... fake news!
That’s right, a 1983 investigation by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation determined a Disney documentary made in 1958 faked the lemming mass suicide story. The filmmakers used a variety of tricks to create the illusion of a stampede before intentionally throwing some lemmings off a cliff to film their deaths in the water below. It was a stupefying story everyone talked about despite the fact that no one actually saw it happen … which sure sounds a lot like the lemming-like march of cable news into an abyss of its own making.

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