

Carnival of Distractions 4

January 18, 2012 Category: American Culture

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On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, the prominent story on the front page of the New York Times had little to do with what happened that day. The front-page story was not “How much U.S. foreign policy has been pissing off large swaths of the globe’s population for the last two generations, thereby increasing the chances of blowback”. Instead, it was: “School Dress Codes vs. Sea of Bare Flesh”.

It’s safe to say: This was probably the most forgotten front-page story in the history of the New York Times. By late morning, school fashion was the last thing on anyone’s mind. Nevertheless, it is illustrative that—on that fateful day—THAT was a front-page story of America’s official “newspaper of record”.

Too often, we look at front-page stories ABOUT 9/11/01. It doesn’t occur to us to ask about the front-page story OF 9/11/01. We rarely ask: What was deemed top priority by the nation’s major newspaper prior to 8:46 am that day? “How much U.S. foreign policy has been pissing off large swaths of the globe’s population for the last two generations, thereby increasing the chances of blowback” BECAME the lesson to be learned that morning.

...At least, it became the lesson for those of us with the self-discipline to set aside national chauvinism for a moment—and who cared to make honest inquiries. Some of us sought explanations for what motivated THE BASE to do what THE BASE did (aside from the prospect of securing 72 nubile young virgins in an after-death paradise)...even if the explanations undermined the false pride to which we’ve become smugly accustomed.

What the New York Times’ front page contained that morning illustrated as much about our culture as did the front-page story the next day (which—by the way—opted NOT to address the issue of fashion choices).

What REALLY WAS the most pressing matter at hand at sunrise on that Tuesday morning? This question was answered in a horrific way—and not by the morning papers. The disconnect between Reality and that on which the mainstream media was focusing was thus highlighted like it had never been before.

At 8:45 am that day, imagine if one had asked most Americans: “But what about the suffering of the Palestinians due to policies supported by the U.S...or what about the global garrison state the Pentagon has indiscriminately installed since World War II...or what about the horrible dictators the U.S. government has supported around the world...and all the resentment that such things are causing? What about all that?”

Imagine. What would have been the typical reply to this impolitic query?

“Who cares” or “Why should I care?” or “That’s not our problem” may have topped the list.

Literally one minute later, devastating events revealed that ALL of us are ultimately affected by what the U.S. government does overseas...and that perhaps clothing styles are NOT

the most important thing we Americans should be concerned with.

Glam Media, Inc. disagrees. It operates **Glam.com** (for women) and **Brash.com** (for men), as well as **Tinker.com** for micro-blogging (e.g. following Twitter events). Micro-blogging, of course, caters to our hyper-short attention spans—a dysfunction that is incessantly reinforced each day by snippet-oriented communication tools like **Tumblr**, **Twitter**, **Plurk**, **Jaiku**, and **Pownce** (now called “SixApart”). What rumor-mills and grape-vines had done with gossip in bygone eras has been automated (and thus put into over-drive) by the new media technology. We’ve gone from hand-crafted gossip to assembly-line gossip at the speed of light.

This isn’t just distraction; it’s **turbo-charged** distraction. Whatever *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *US Weekly*, *Starz*, and *In Touch* magazines had been doing prior to Web 2.0, it is now streamlined for more ravenous, relentless consumption. It is streamlined by the new social media technology with which we’ve become so enamored. The Carnival of Distractions is now on steroids, and the public discourse, so vital to a deliberative democracy, has deteriorated as a result.

ELEMENTS OF THE CARNIVAL:

America’s cultural dysfunction is on full display during any given episode of America’s favorite morning program, *Regis & Kelly*...or, really, any other chit-chat show oriented around the mindless banter of hosts concerned with the banality du jour. But much of what’s wrong with current American culture is encapsulated in a quote from Michael Wolff, founder of the promiscuous content aggregator, **Newsier.com**:

“What you’re going to hear...is that the media is necessary for the commonweal; that an informed citizenry is what this nation is about. That is self-serving crap.”

(Note: He said this with a straight face.)

Self-serving crap, indeed. Commonweal? What does THAT mean? Informed citizenry? THAT doesn’t sound like much fun. Besides, what do such things have to do with a savvy business plan?

Hit-hungry content aggregators like **Newsier.com** are seeking sheer TRAFFIC, not to serve the common good. They are glibly unconcerned with striving to edify the rank and file. They are unconcerned simply because that’s not part of an effective plan to generate traffic. Erudite journalism, therefore, is a moot point in this scheme. It’s not that these operations don’t care about democracy; it’s that they’re trying to make as much money as possible for themselves, democracy or not.

Within this media paradigm, attention isn’t allocated based on objective standards of importance; it is allocated based on BUZZ or HYPE...and how provocative or “juicy” the piece happens to be. The focus isn’t on erudition; it’s on how snazzy and alluring the presentation can be made.

There is, then, a strong incentive to sensationalize everything—to turn everything into a spectacle, no matter how trivial. Using this model, presentation trumps substance. Ergo Roger Ailes’ hot blonds reading teleprompters sans neural activity in their pre-frontal cortexes. Roger Ailes knows EXACTLY what he’s doing. And he does it very, very well.

Bucking this trend is Paul Steiger, who founded the non-profit, **ProPublica**, in order to facilitate quality, investigative journalism. Steiger’s enterprise is the antithesis of the (patently irresponsible) supply-and-demand-driven “let’s just give them whatever they want” approach to media. He recognizes that journalism is a vital public service—as deliberative democracy is predicated on a well-informed rank and file (i.e. a demos). Instead of a civically-engaged citizenry, though, we have an intellectually impoverished, factioned rabble. This is the direct effect of pop media.

Obviously, the “whatever sells” approach is not in the best interest of the public. It is no profound insight to hold that journalism must be, above all things, a public service—and secondarily, if at all, a business. It has been clearly demonstrated that the moment “news” becomes—first and foremost—a business, we get the media paradigm of Rupert Murdoch and Sam Zell: mindless info-tainment at best; iniquitous corporate propaganda otherwise.

When content is treated as a consumer product (rather than as a public good), this is the natural outcome. The repercussions of this prevailing m.o. are dire: An egregiously ill-informed citizenry (and, consequently, a woefully degenerate public discourse).

In a nutshell, by allowing media to become a Carnival of Distractions, people get the red-tops instead of, say, *The Guardian*. Here in America, we get *People* magazine instead of *The New Yorker*; *TMZ* instead of *Frontline*; *Entertainment Tonight* instead of *American Experience*; *Regis & Kelly* instead of Bill Moyers; Mark Levin instead of *This American Life*; *The New York Post* instead of *The Nation*; *Newsmax* instead of *Salon.com*. In each case, the juxtaposition is utterly staggering.

That juxtaposition is very illustrative of our systemic dysfunction. But just follow the money, and the explanation for it is plain to see: the Carnival of Distractions is a booming business.

And so it goes: We get commentary about clothing trends on the front page of America’s pre-eminent newspaper...even as the catastrophic repercussions of our foreign policy interrupt a sunny Tuesday morning. We couldn’t understand why those planes were hijacked; but, hey, at least we knew what outfits were fashionable that season.

In an intellectually malnourished culture, Reality TV “sells” better than, say, PBS. And the citizenry, instead of being well-informed, is an easily manipulated mass of thoroughly-amused idiots...shopping around for whatever STUFF tantalizes their fancy—be it handbags or economic policy. After all, in a hyper-consumerist culture, EVERYTHING is seen (and treated) as a consumer product. Even ideas.

All the while, many Americans remain blissfully oblivious to the most consequential issues. We fixate on petty concerns each day even as unchecked power continues to consolidate—transferring wealth from the disappearing middle class to large corporate conglomerates. Meanwhile, **Zynga** is keeping us occupied with deliciously banal pass-times on our smart-phones.

Here's the rub: Many of us are chronically fixated on quotidian concerns...even as we remain blissfully oblivious to the most important matters of the era. When we "surf" the "web", we occupy ourselves with urgent updates on fashion trends, the scores of sporting events, and the latest juicy scoop of celebrity gossip. When we're not viewing photos of cute babies (or videos of our friends' antics at the bar last night), we're chatting on IM and exchanging texts while checking status updates. It's a perpetual stream of pedestrian muck.

ANALYSIS:

A ubiquitous sense of self-involvement permeates the media ecosystem. In such an environment, fixation on the petty becomes standard operating procedure. Most Americans know who's dating who and who's wearing what, but haven't the faintest clue whether or not trickle-down economics is myth or Reality. This is a systemic problem—a problem that affects all of us.

Asked to explain what the difference is between universal public healthcare and "socialism", many Americans will respond with a fumbling string of inane bromides that they've memorized from who-knows-where. They really don't have the faintest clue what EITHER really is, but are perfectly fine with that. Labeling one of them "good" and one of them "bad" (per the instructions of the impresarios of the national conversation) suffices.

The most dangerous form of ignorance is ignorance of one's own ignorance. If this is the goal, then all is going according to plan. We Americans are fully apprised of the latest fashion trends, yet remain oblivious as wealth becomes increasingly concentrated. Every day, corporate socialism siphons public funds from vital social services into the coffers of war profiteers...but we never hear about that on *The View*. Our supine minds are ready receptacles for whatever STUFF we happen to be inundated by each day. And we eagerly consume it. We consume it because it's there.

A SURVEY:

Local news is sometimes the most preposterous example of the Carnival of Distractions. Each evening, viewers are kept fully apprised of every car crash, every case of domestic violence, every fire, and every petty scandal. Accidents are "disasters", good turns of luck are "miracles", and a few inches of precipitation is treated as if Armageddon were upon us. When even the most mundane things are sensationalized to the point of absurdity, we lose track of things that ACTUALLY MATTER. As we are desensitized, we become inured to the kinds of things that should deeply move us.

So, on **Youtube**, a video of an adorable kitty playing the banjo will go viral to millions. But the footage of Palestinian families being slaughtered? Who cares? Why concern myself with such things? Besides, my favorite Reality TV show starts in two minutes.

Therein lies the rub: Our priorities become colossally skewed by pop culture. Silly skits of talking fruit are generating **hundreds of millions** of hits...even as few people ever take the time to read a single important work by a world-renown scholar. There's nothing wrong with appreciating some comedy now and then, but many of us seem to **ONLY** want vapid entertainment in our leisure time.

The few of us who **DO** read books tend to select un-edifying yet immensely amusing pulp. (After a long-day's work, who wants to **THINK**?) So what sorts of things do we Tweet about on a typical day? Opinions about the latest American Idol finalists...or Operation Cast Led? (Operation Cast *what?*)

700,000 Americans go bankrupt each year, largely because of shamefully exorbitant medical bills. Who cares? Didn't you hear that Justin Bieber kissed a girl yesterday!

According to the NIH, about 20,000 Americans die each year because they can't get the healthcare they need. (That's the equivalent of almost seven 9/11's each year.) How about **THAT** on the front page of the New York Times?

Never.

Inquiring minds want to know what each public official is doing with his penis. So why discuss the iniquities of the horrifically inefficient for-profit, sickness-treatment industry? It's enough to know that if we question it, we're endorsing something called "socialism"—which, we're told, means "Un-American".

Yes, the Carnival of Distractions dictates our priorities. And, at present, our priorities are antithetical to those of a healthy society. No matter; we're marvelously entertained. So the carnival continues, as scheduled.

Is it any wonder, then, that tens of millions of well-meaning, working class Americans (preposterously) **STILL** vote for politicians who promote supply-side economics? Blame this flabbergasting fact on widespread ignorance. Blame it on corporate-funded propaganda. But, in the final analysis, the explanation for such a ridiculous state of affairs boils down to one thing: the Carnival of Distractions.

NOVACANE:

Amusing distractions essentially acts as Novacane for cognitive dissonance. So the American public can remain utterly clueless about fundamental things while remaining eternally smug that they're "on top of things". So long as their amused, they're inured to their own ignorance.

So we watch the local news each evening...presumably to make sure we know "what's going on". The latest robbery across town and yet another traffic jam...and, in between, broadcast time is filled with a smorgasbord of pointless "soft" stories (a.k.a. "human interest" or

“puff” pieces) to satisfy our craving for melodrama.

That’s right: Tens of millions will tune in to a puppy playing a fiddle while riding a unicycle...yet will remain blissfully unaware that the Pentagon just wasted another trillion dollars of tax-payer money. We’ll watch commentary on last night’s ball-game to see how our favorite sports team is doing...yet be unaware that GE paid zero corporate taxes last year.

Then we’ll adamantly demand that the government raise taxes on NOBODY. Why? Because ALL taxes are BAD. (At least, that’s what the guy on CNBC keeps telling us.) Indeed, tens of millions of working class people are irate at Obama for raising taxes on them...when he actually LOWERED their taxes...yet they are utterly unconcerned about large corporations paying no taxes whatsoever—even during years of record profits when everyone else is suffering. How can companies get this? Due to the enormous tax-breaks afforded them by the very right-wing economic policy those same people are SUPPORTING. Get it?

It sounds like a bad comedy, except all this is really happening. How is this possible? A daily dose of Novacane for cognitive dissonance. So the Tea Party cheers on the very plutocratic agenda that caused the problems they’re complaining about. It’s a classic case of political Stockholm Syndrome.

Meanwhile, those same people were ABSOLUTELY LIVID when Obama sought to curb the most egregious abuses of the large medical insurance companies (in order to HELP people like THEM). Why so livid? Because they were convinced that such a common-sense measure was really a maniacal plot to install a socialist regime (and thus to control everyone’s lives).

Make sense?

Well, yes: It DOES make sense once we factor in the Carnival of Distractions. In fact, it all makes perfect sense, once we answer the question: Cui bono from the Carnival of Distractions? (Hint: not those who are being distracted.)

Here’s the thing. The local news isn’t there to inform; it’s there to talk about STUFF that’s “going on”. This all may seem relatively innocuous—until we realize that THIS is how many people are devoting their time and attention (during a very limited window) each evening. Such temporal displacement is a big problem.

The illusion of “being fully informed” can be dangerous when people are staggeringly ignorant. Ignorant, that is, yet incessantly cramming their minds with pointless tid-bits of information that have no bearing on major issues. Why is this chronic mis-impression such a bad thing? Because it precludes the motivation to do things that may *actually be* edifying.

So what on the surface seems like harmless fluff-material is actually enabling the pandemic obliviousness responsible for our beleaguered democracy. The Carnival serves as an anesthetic for our ignorance: we’re all rendered numb with amusement—and become incapable of noticing how out-of-touch we really are.

Rarely do TV viewers (or radio listeners) pose the elementary question: But do I really need to know this? Will I become a more civically-engaged citizen now that I’m aware of this? Far more often than not, the answer is: NO.

How often does the “latest juicy scoop” make us genuinely wiser? No matter. Juicy scoops is what corporate-run media outlets inundate us with, day in and day out...*because that’s*

what sells

Original essay at: <https://www.masonscott.org/carnival-of-distractions-4>

As with other modes of media entertainment, audiences demand from the “news” that it have lots of “action” and be super-saturated with oodles of drama. Since “news” is treated as a business rather than as a public service, networks happily oblige. (After all, maximizing market-share is the sine qua non of any programming when the programming is simply a commodity delivered by a money-hungry corporation.)

Consequently, broadcasters are inclined to make a spectacle out of everything and anything. So we get programs labeled silly things like “ACTION NEWS” and we receive mundane reports labeled “NEWS ALERT”. (Only in the context of this ridiculous scheme would we hear inane phrases like “war on terror” and think it makes any logical sense.)

The Novacane is working.

DIAGNOSIS:

As benign as info-tainment may be *in itself*, in the grand scheme of our daily lives, its effects are actually quite malignant. Chit-chat shows like *The View* or *Today* seem relatively anodyne: handy cosmetic tips, how to bake a better cake, what to wear next season, and whatnot. However, such programs end up DIVERTING attention in ways that we often don’t notice.

Think about it: If people’s primary source of “keeping up on what’s going on” is a morning talk show (*Good Morning America* or *Regis & Kelly*, for example)...and they devote other spare time to perusing *Better Homes & Gardens* and *The New York Post*...and then sit down to watch the local news each evening before dinner...then...

How on earth could they possibly ever learn about foreign policy, economic policy, social policy...or even how to think critically about anything?

Such people may be aware of every shooting, robbery, fire, kidnapping, car crash, fashion faux pas, and celebrity scandal from the last week, but they will remain utterly oblivious to important matters. OBJECTIVELY important matters, that is.

In other words: Tens of millions of Americans will rarely glean information that will actually help them become responsible citizens. Deliberative democracy can’t survive on tabloid papers, talk shows, weather reports, traffic reports, and gossip mags. It requires an intellectually curious citizenry that takes the time to do their homework.

Genuine democracy is predicated on a rank and file that will make the effort to read high quality, investigative journalism, tune in to PBS or the BBC or NPR, and—once in a while—read a book written by a bona fide scholar. Alas, in an orgy of idle amusements, what place is there for a bona fide scholar?

TALKING HEADS:

Comfortably ensconced in the Carnival of Distractions, most people will keep themselves magnificently up-to-date on petty matters...yet will be glibly ignorant about civic matters—*staggeringly ignorant*, in fact. These well-meaning people are guaranteed to remain clueless about foreign affairs, public health, and the basic principles of sociology...even as they persist with the grievously mistaken impression that they're staying "in the know". (After all, Regis & Kelly are always chatting about the hot topic du jour, aren't they? *What else* is there for us to care about today?)

Tragically, for the politically curious, the problem is often made even worse. For, if that curiosity is misguided, some people will actually pay attention to patently fraudulent sources—turning mere benightedness into full-blown ideology. Such people are not merely ignorant, they are terrifyingly mislead. For these audiences, the primary source of information is either a host of celebrity charlatans (on CNBC, CNN, etc.) or right-wing political pundits (most notably, from the proto-fascist propaganda factory, FoxNews).

Either way, such audiences bask in the comforting illusion that they're staying "politically informed"...when, in fact, they're actually ensuring—day in and day out—that they are the most egregiously MIS-informed people in society.

Some of these "politically-involved" people will even subscribe to horrifically bad periodicals, like *The Weekly Standard* or *The American Spectator*...or perhaps read the (notoriously preposterous) op-ed section of the Wall Street Journal. If especially dedicated, they will even purchase a book by their professional bloviator of choice—an act that succeeds only in reinforcing their pre-existing ideological bent.

The key is, doing so is immensely gratifying. Gratification is all they're looking for. So that's what they do. All the while, such people are under the impression that they're edifying themselves. They're convinced that they know all they need to know—and fuck you for suggesting otherwise.

And so it goes.

The thought of *tens of millions* of people doing this is horrifying. So the question becomes: Why do they do this? (And: How do we correct this?)

PROGNOSIS:

In the three previous installments of the "Carnival of Distractions" series, I've been careful to point out: There's nothing inherently wrong with watching a sit-com (to laugh) or a ball-game (to cheer). There's nothing bad about watching some Reality TV every once in a while. Indeed, we all need to watch a little fluff here and there. It's entertaining...and a much needed escape from the anxieties of everyday life.

So let's be clear: The problem isn't perusing *People* magazine from time to time. The problem isn't tuning in to a chit-chat show now and then...just to kick back, turn one's brain off, and relax. It's all harmless fun. We all do it.

The problems arise when this is ALL that we do with our spare time.

In other words, when such insipid things DOMINATE our lives, we end up paying attention to those things *at the expense of* (objectively) more important things. To be blunt: When we over-emphasize “fluff” in our daily lives, we become a nation of thoroughly-amused idiots.

Escapism, in moderation, is healthy. But after limited bouts, it is very important that we come back to Reality and attend to (objectively) important matters...such as a man who was illegitimately installed as POTUS in 2000 due to a flagrantly rigged election in Florida. Otherwise, we'll be more concerned that the votes on ***American Idol*** were tabulated correctly.

Alas, many Americans spend almost all of their leisure time immersed in the Carnival of Distractions. To make matters worse, when people become captivated by celebrity charlatans, they become disastrously mis-informed...to the point of sabotaging the public discourse—thereby incapacitating the demos.

Insofar as we are ill-informed, we default on our civic responsibility to be erudite citizens...and deliberative democracy becomes untenable. Of course, this is PRECISELY how plutocrats want things to be—which is why they do whatever they can to partition the polis into disparate factions. By doing so, solidarity is vanquished, as one part of the rank and file is pitted against another. We all become mired in a pointless feud based on fabricated antagonisms.

In this way, the rabble is fragmented into insular communities. Such an effect entails the dis-aggregation and demobilization of the polis—thus undermining Americans' ability to forge a demos. The Carnival of Distractions subverts participatory democracy...and we're all the worse off for it.

School Dress Codes vs. Sea of Bare Flesh: you decide.