Carnival of Distractions 5

In this fifth installment of the Carnival Of Distractions series, I elaborate on some of the points made earlier.The thesis throughout the series has been quite simple:

We Americans chronically concern themselves with the kinds of (inconsequential) things that a responsible citizen would never pay attention to.Consequently, we have become a citizenry bereft of erudition.

Here in America, there is a widespread hyper-awareness of the irrelevant on a daily basis: Was Barack Obama really born in Honolulu?What drugs was Michael Jackson using leading up to his death?Did Lindsay Lohan get arrested again?Who's getting custody of Charlie Sheen's children?What did each congressman do with his penis last night?What's in fashion right now?Who will win the ballgame tonight?And, for the love of god, who is that celebrity sleeping with?

Nobody is immune to such vapid fascinations.Even as an adult, I endure tremendous anxiety when following my favorite sports team.And, yes, I have crushes on various attractive movie stars…and thus find myself curious to know who they might be dating.I almost can't help myself.There is something about the universal psychology of homo sapiens that draws us to such things.

Naturally, media outlets prey on these innate penchants—stoking our adolescent urges to the detriment of our culture.Doing so is a savvy business plan: supply meets demand.We demand sensationalized scandal, manufactured spectacle, and fabricated melodrama…so that's precisely what we're fed, day in and day out.It keeps us happy.It keeps us occupied.It keeps us placated.

The "side effect" to all this is that, in fixating on petty matters so much of the time, there is a displacement of our time and attention—shifting it from other things that are—almost certainly—objectively more important.The repercussions of this on-going charade pass un-noticed.We feed ravenously on tabloid fodder even as our public discourse degenerates.Once we're sufficiently distracted from matters of greater consequence, we inevitably fail to grasp the gravity of important issues.We are rendered absentee citizens.

THE BEST CASE STUDY:

The Carnival Of Distractions series started by addressing two striking examples of the petty fixations that consume our attention: the weddings (and the fashion choices) and the dalliances of public figures in 2011.I abstained, however, from mentioning the example that best captures how severely we've degenerated: the fascination with a certain man's lascivious escapades over a decade ago.

In 1998, it was the same routine as it was in 2011.The prime question on everyone's mind was not what the long-term effects of Neoliberal economic policy (Rubinomics) would have on our country, but rather: **Did Bill Clinton get a blow job from anyone other than his wife?**

Every American simply HAD to know.

Did Monica or didn't Monica suck on William's penis?And did ALL of his seaman get into Monica's mouth…or did some of it end up on her dress?And, for the love of God, why isn't he telling everyone about it!

Sound like ridiculous questions to be asking?They should.They ARE ridiculous questions.But tens of millions indulged in this fatuous charade: Should a congressional inquiry be launched about William's dalliances…or just on what he has opted to SAY ABOUT those dalliances?Tens of millions of scandal-hungry Americans craved every salacious detail.But WHY?Or, more to the point: To what end?

Nobody was ever actually quite sure WHY.But no matter.While the "Starr Report" sold like hotcakes, not many people were reading anything that would have helped them become better citizens.Few actually took the time to learn about anything that may have been genuinely edifying: the de-regulation frenzy, the cutting of vital social services in order to fund pointless tax-breaks for large corporations, the obscenely bloated Pentagon budget…

That Kenneth Starr is arguable one of the most venal and preposterous (and pathetic) human beings ever to walk the face of the planet seemed not to pose a problem for those who had decided that they simply HATED the president—especially now that he was apparently getting blow jobs!And so the issue became about inane abstractions like "character".What kinds of married men allow young interns to blow them?A fascinating question, indeed.

Of course, most of the fuss that was made over this ridiculous matter derived from one thing: envy (masquerading as "moral outrage", of course).It seemed that every Republican (read: unattractive, old, white man) was seething with resentment.It

quickly became apparent that each was resentful that HE wasn't the one getting blown in the Oval Office.So, naturally, each Republican encountered the urge to lash out in a desperate attempt to deal with that (suppressed) resentment.

As we all know, spite is a powerful human emotion.(Memo to Republicans: Self-confident straight men don't concern themselves with what other men do with their penises.)

What was, in fact, wrong with Clinton's deeds had nothing whatsoever to do with his penis.It had to do with his promotion of right-wing economic policy (i.e. allowing Neoliberal ideology to dictate legislation)…which, predictably, led to utterly disastrous results.This was perhaps a slightly more pressing issue than the identification of cum stains on random garments.

The Lewinsky "scandal" proved that millions of American citizens had the sexual maturity of a 6th grader.American sensibilities have been geared to sophomoric preoccupations by the Carnival of Distractions—a carnival to which most of us have glibly acclimated ourselves.Consequently, little of out time or attention remains to attend to objectively important matters.

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CARNIVAL:

Imagine a world in which the following happened: Upon hearing that the President may have gotten blown by an intern (and, predictably, didn't want to tell anyone about it), everyone in the country shrugged and said, "**So**."

When pressed about the matter, people would tend to respond, "If he's being unfaithful, it's an unfortunate thing.But that's between him, his wife, and the alleged mistress.What has any of it to do with his performance as a public servant?Stop wasting my time with gossip.Let's concentrate on matters that are actually relevant to the common good."

Imagine.

Imagine, further, if the amount of time, money, and energy spent on that pointless inquiry in '98 had been devoted—instead—to making political campaigns more fair and transparent (while purging elections of big money's influence), to exposing the dot com bubble, to critiquing "Free Trade" and the ill-advised deregulation of the financial sector, or to spreading awareness about the colossal inefficiency of the for-profit sickness-treatment industry.

Imagine.

The conclusion is difficult to avoid: We've become a nation of well-entertained idiots.Tens of millions of American citizens have abdicated any meaningful involvement in a participatory democracy.The consequences of this are dire—yet go largely unnoticed.After all, we're too distracted to notice that we're distracted.That a genuine democracy is predicated on a well-informed citizenry seems not to pose a problem when one is attending to one's Facebook page three hours each day while fussing over the finer details of every celebrity scandal.

The personal affairs of public figures are sensationalized for our on-going amusement while the logistics of public policy are rarely discussed.So we find ourselves paying attention to things that end up being utterly inconsequential for most of us.We obsess over petty matters as if they were of DIRE consequence to each one of us—and of paramount relevance to the future of human civilization.

In most "news" periodicals, scandal (no matter how manufactured) is the top priority: the more salacious the better. Audiences crave to be apprised of the latest "juicy scoop" on such things.After all, it's perversely enjoyable to devote copious amounts of time to "getting the dirt" on other people.It's why the "red-tops" sell like hotcakes in Britain.It's why more people read The New York Post than The New Yorker.And it's why most of us would rather watch an episode of TMZ than listen to interviews on C-Span's "Book TV".It's why Reggis & Kelly is more popular than Charlie Rose.

The consequence of these dysfunctional trends are plain to see: We're more familiar with what transpired on the latest episode of our favorite TV show than with the problems with U.S. foreign policy…or the defects in the latest domestic legislation.We all know who Oprah is, but few know who Immanuel Kant is.We read popular trash-pulp (be it mystics promising happiness, "inspirational" speakers offering the secrets to acquiring stupendous wealth, or the latest rant by the political pundit du jour)…yet most of us have never read John Rawls' Theory of Justice.

Most Americans have NEVER HEARD of Rawls' magnum opus.As for Joseph Stiglitz? Naomi Klein?John Kenneth Galbraith?Who's that?What are they wearing?Who are they dating?

Millions are too busy flipping through Vogue magazine to understand the most elementary things about healthcare, economics, or international relations…let alone become well-versed in the scientific method and the basic principles of sociology, or —heaven forbid—analytical philosophy.This is a serious problem—a problem rarely discussed.

THE PROBLEM:

We peruse the latest issue of Cosmopolitan to find the newest dating tips…and grab the self-help book du jour in an attempt to occupy ourselves with something meaningful.In the process, we fail to become well-informed, responsible citizens.

…But we FEEL as though we're staying abreast of important matters: What to wear, how to fuck, where to shop, and what the "cool" people are buying.We don't know why supply-side economic policies will NEVER benefit the working class…but, hey, we're quite certain which upholstery we want in our new SUV.

So the problem is an intellectually emaciated body politic.That millions of people still subscribe to supply-side economics **after three decades of its horrible results** is nothing short of astonishing.It seems outrageous, that is, until we factor in the Carnival of Distractions.Then the explanation for such widespread Political Stockholm Syndrome becomes quite clear.

Think about it: Tens of millions of well-meaning, otherwise level-headed adults don't know whether to listen to Joseph Stiglitz and James Surowiecki…or to the cavalcade of charlatans on CNBC…when looking to learn something about macro-economics.This is like wanting to learn about chemical reactions, and not knowing whether to listen to a world-renown chemistry professor…or an alchemist peddling his magical elixir on a late-night info-mercial.

Prompted by the enticing images churned out by major media outlets, we're busy dreaming about this chimerical thing called The American Dream—a captivating vision that is ceaselessly peddled to us via captivating corporate marketing schemes.The wonders of American-style capitalism are romanticized to the point of distraction in mainstream programming.So we gleefully play along with the prevailing scheme, none-the-wiser to its adverse effects on the general populace.

How are we so disconnected from Reality?We're too busy living vicariously through the celebrities who embody a life we hope is just around the corner.We think "Reality TV" is reality, because—after all—that's what Reality TV is CALLED.We are oblivious to our oblivious-ness.It only stands to reason: when millions are ignorant of their own ignorance, it would never occur to them that they're being taken for fools.

The Carnival of Distractions is seductive, yet it harms us is palpable ways.The "catch" is that we're too enthralled by the carnival to notice the harm that the carnival doing.It brings to mind the intoxicating trappings of Pleasure Island in the movie, Pinocchio.Even an animated Disney feature explains to us something we often forget: It's easier to exploit people if you distract them from the fact that they're being exploited.The key, then, is to get them to ENJOY the exploitation.(This is, of course, how religion often operates.)The best way to manipulate people is to convince them that they're not being manipulated.

A SURVEY:

I wonder: If every person who read **The Secret** had—instead—read Carroll's **House of War** or Hartmann's **Unequal Protection** or Klein's **The Shock Doctrine** or Judt's **Ill Fares the Land**…would things be different now?

If nobody ever watched FoxNews ever again, would the world become a slightly better place?

If everyone who devoted an evening to watching Reality TV spent all that time reading The Nation or The New Yorker instead, would elections have different outcomes?

Yes.Yes.And yes, without a doubt.

What would change in a world where everyone was well aware of the insights of Thomas Paine and John Maynard Keynes and John Kenneth Galbraith…and nobody gave a hoot about Bill's episodes of fellatio, Prince William getting married, or Anthony Weiner's crotch photos?In an intellectually vibrant society, what would we tend to do MORE of that we currently RARELY do?

- Ask if corporations need the same rights as human beings
- Ascertain whether or not money should be treated as "speech"
- Recognize the crucial role that basic public infrastructure plays in a healthy democracy
- Wonder why structural inequalities still exist in such a wealthy country

- Think about how a civil society attends to pubic health
- Apply the lessons of Jesus of Nazareth—whether he was god or not—to U.S. foreign policy…and to domestic policy

Such things are transplanted by worries about the next sale at the mall and which team will win the ballgame tonight.So discussing those important matters rarely arises during the course of a typical day in the life of the typical American.

Twitter feeds and postings on Facebook walls simply aren't conducive to serious discussions.Generally, blogs are either echo-chambers or rhetorical pissing contests.And even political commentary has become more an exercise in ideological cheerleading than erudite sociological analysis.We're infatuated with visions of The American Dream, even as we allow structural inequalities to persist.

Then we wonder why the nation is afflicted with so many problems.

So the predicament is as follows: Most Americans are inundated incessantly with deluge after deluge of useless information.But it's all so wonderfully entertaining… so it keeps tens of millions chronically distracted.Such distractions seem harmless at first blush.But the fact is that all of it "crowds out" the few gems of important information.So we find ourselves extremely concerned with things that, where we wiser, we wouldn't be concerned with at all.

On SOME level, most of us are aware that almost all of the fodder found in the tabloid papers (like the New York Post / Daily News) is utterly useless.Nevertheless, these are the most popular periodicals in the New York City area.Why?Well, their content is splendidly simple, brief, provocative, and requires no cognitive exertion whatsoever.In other words, such rags are absolutely perfect for an intellectually sclerotic audience.

When people want to tune in to "the news", they watch the morning talk-shows and/or the local evening news programs—which are little other than (largely pointless) traffic and weather reports interspersed with a scandal here and a spectacle there… and perhaps a "soft" piece (a.k.a. a "human interest" story) just to keep things interesting in between commercial breaks.

So our attention is not only SHORT, it is DIVERTED.And we concern ourselves with objectively unimportant issues that are made to SEEM as though they are eminently "pressing" at the moment.Alas, when even the most mundane things are labeled "URGENT", urgency becomes meaningless…and our ability to discern the relevant

from the inane dissolves.By the next month, most of the “urgent” stories are forgotten, and we’ve moved on to the next provocative installment of “breaking news”.

ANALYSIS:

Which is more harmful to our society: systemic corporatism…or a congressman’s sexual escapades?What is of greater concern to us, the $1 trillion dollars of tax-payer money siphoned away by the military industrial complex each year…or some tawdry dialogues a congressman has with random strangers?Shall we devote our time and energy to addressing the neglected social services and the deteriorating public infrastructure across our country…or to scrutinizing the fashion choices of Kate Middleton before her nuptials?

Not only don’t we answer these questions; we are no longer even inclined to pose them.

Pop quiz.In 1998, tens of millions chose to make only one of the following two inquiries:

- Which has been proven to work, supply-side or demand-side economics?
- Did Monica get any cum on her dress?

It is little mystery which issue was addressed most in mainstream media that year.So now we STILL haven’t any clue which economic policies actually work…but we DO now know that Monica doesn’t swallow.

Fast-forward a decade: Tens of millions of working-class people were joining a bizarre movement that called itself “The Tea Party”. Here, millions opted to—you guessed it—push for MORE supply-side economics (i.e. the very policies that had caused all the problems over which they were so incensed).Indeed, the Carnival of Distractions is an incubator of Political Stockholm Syndrome. But even more than that, people are rendered inadvertantly self-destructive. As any historian can explain, the original “tea party” was protesting corporate tax-BREAKS (tax-breaks for the large large corporation in bed with the ruling government). The 2009-10 movement, on the other hand, was formed to PROMOTE tax-breaks for corporations. It is little wonder that it was instigated and funded by the very plutocrats who stood to actually benefit from such policies…even as the credulous followers would continue to be screwed.

How could so many possibly be so duped by so obvious a sham? More than ever, people who take the time to understand the vital issues of the day are a dying breed.Vapidity is glamorized; insipidity has become chic.Indeed, we can all be provincial and aloof…**so long as we do it fashionably**.Candy-coated fluff seems to satiate our craving for fleeting gratifications—even as our atrophied minds remain blissfully stagnant.

So we go to the local bar, drink a couple beers with the guys while engaging in idle banter…then go home, do our laundry, watch a little television, check our e-mail, monitor the Twitter feed, update our Facebook status, read the best-selling book about how to be rich / happy / successful / skinny…then turn out the lights and go to sleep.Just like we did yesterday.Just like we'll do tomorrow.

What enables this perpetual cycle of quotidian banality?

Behold: A scandal-obsessed, low-brow, corporate-run info-tainment industry offering drama and spectacle for us to feast on 'til our hearts' conent…with nary a bona fide scholar to be seen from here to the horizon…and celebrity charlatans as far as the eye can see. It's a panoramic vista of an intellectually barren landscape littered with tasty treats.

Allow me to be blunt: We are a nation of thoroughly amused, intellectually impoverished drones.It should come as no surprise, then, that so much of the electorate keeps voting iniquitous plutocrats into high public office…all the while under the impression that their choices are splendid. They are convinced that they are doing the right thing because they have been told a lot of enticing things about promoting "freedom" and how magnificently kick-ass America is.What's no to like about that? So long as a guy stands in front of enough American flags and proclaims that he'll protect our "liberties", whatever else he says will sound positively fantastic.

Many of us swallow every rhetorical flourish simply because we're not accustomed to critically analyzing exposition.We **don't need to** have such accumen when all we do is watch Reality TV and read People magazine.

CONCLUSION:

The U.S. doesn't even remotely resemble a deliberative democracy.There are several reasons for this, but a significant part of the explanation is that the country has devolved into a pageant of mindless spectacle.

Within the Carnival of Distractions, idle pre-frontal cortexes are perfectly acceptable…so long as intermittent dopamine rushes satiate our craving to be amused.We thus remain completely distracted from things of profound consequence.But that's okay…so long as media offerings cater to our disposition for vapid titillation.Ergo the Lewinsky "scandal" of 1998 and the Anthony Weiner "scandal" of 2011 and all the other ridiculous things we treat as if they were of cosmic importance.

We Americans must start asking ourselves serious questions if we want our country to improve.Which is of more relevance to the public interest: (A) monitoring lewd photos exchanged between consenting adults or (B) enacting ROTA for the financial sector?That the answer is (B) SEEMS so obvious.Nevertheless, we pick (A) over (B) almost every time.Yes, we are outraged at a crotch-shot…yet complacent regarding the trillion dollars of tax-payer money wasted at the Pentagon each year.

Of course, this is all perfectly fine for Goldman Sachs.Yet it doesn't bode well for the rank and file.When our standards for public discourse have fallen so abysmally low, our current problems are to be expected.

Yes: In the spring of 2011, tens of millions were fully informed about congressman Weiner's wooing tactics, yet remained completely unaware that the so-called "Long War" on "Terror" was a complete sham…and that the "War On Drugs" had been officially deemed an abject failure…and that tax-cuts for the super-rich don't help anyone but the super-rich…and that it was the right-wing's deregulation crusade (not too many public services) that proved disastrous for the national economy…and that it is more regulation of the financial services industry and more investment in public services and more taxation on the super-rich that will stimulate the economy.

Tens of millions are unaware of ANY of this.It should come as little surprise, then, that tens of millions continue to take unapologetic corporatists seriously.Plutocracy thrives when the citizenry remains distracted.

And therein lay the tragedy: The only data most Americans have to go on is the dirt gleaned from yesterday's tabloid stories and the bloviations of clueless political pundits.So long as we can get our next quick fix of passive-minded amusement, we'll remain distracted enough not to notice that our society is being destroyed by a cabal of oligarchs…the SAME people who, it turns out, are the impresarios of the Carnival of Distractions.

Gee-wiz.Imagine that.

The funny thing is: Those with the power DEPEND ON this carnival to keep the general populace sufficiently distracted.Alas, the moment we start paying attention, the oligarchy might end.The oligarchs are well aware of this fact.We should be too.