

JUNK NEWS

But it wasn't so easy to see the big picture. Most people didn't see it. How could they have? In the 1990s, 70 percent of Americans were relying on television for their news. And what was TV calling news in the nineties? O.J. Simpson, the Bobbitts, and Joey Buttafuoco.

In one week in January 1995, television devoted 400 percent more time to O.J. Simpson than to the second-most-covered story, Clinton's State of the Union address (106 minutes compared to 28 minutes, according to the *Tyndall Report*). Never before in the history of television had so much time been spent on a murder case. Was O.J. guilty? What about the DNA tests? Would a jury with eight black women on it acquit O.J.? And what about the feuding lawyers?

From *Day Break* to *Nightline*, it was anchors aweigh! Media spokesmen, for the most part, were unapologetic, even defiant.

Speaking to TV critics as if they were schoolchildren, he [Ted Koppel] said: "This [O.J.] is a terrific story. We are in the news business as are you, as are the people you work for. We live in a commercial competitive world. What was it that the public lost? What were they deprived of? Soaps? Is that what we're in this righteous snit about?" (*USA Today*, 7/19/94)

Actually, the public was being deprived of more than soaps. It was being deprived of news about the breakdown and dissolution of the entire society.

"Broadcast journalism has gone from Edward R. Murrow to P. T. Barnum," said Dr. Ronald Villane, professor of communications at the State University of New York. "Newscasters are not journalists; they pitch stories like barkers luring people to circus side shows." (*Trends in the News*, 7/15/94).

60 Minutes correspondent Lesley Stahl told *America's Talking Straight Forward* Tuesday the secret to success in TV journalism these days: "a little violence, a little sex and a little peek under the skirt, so to speak." (*USA Today*, 10/27/94)

Or a "little peek" under the circus tent, "so to speak." On rare occasions, media spokesmen had an inkling of reality. In 1993, Dan Rather took his own colleagues to task at a meeting of the Radio and Television Directors Association. He complained that news programs were put in competition with entertainment programs, leading to an emphasis on "dead bodies, mayhem and lurid tales." Rather scolded news media managers for believing that:

Americans won't put up with news from other countries. Americans won't put up with economic news. Americans won't put up with serious, substantive news of any kind.

The new motto is kiss ass, move with the mass, and for heaven's and the rating's sake, don't make anybody mad—especially not the mayor, the governor, the senator, the president or vice-president, or anybody in a position of power. Make nice, not news.

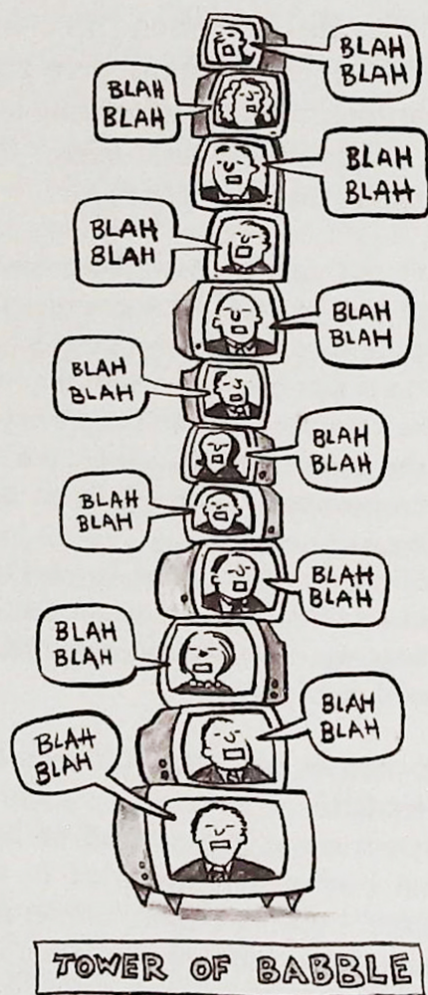
We all should be ashamed of what we have and have not done, measured against what we could do, ashamed of many of the things we have allowed our craft, our profession, our life's work to become.

That was Dan Rather in 1993. In 1995, he was doing "O.J. Minutes" for CBS.

The O.J. Simpson story, like a hundred barely remembered sensational stories that preceded it, is junk news. Sex, crime, disaster, more sex, more crime, more disaster, and all those babies lost, kidnapped, falling off a building and surviving, or not surviving—all make for junk news. Nothing is learned, nothing solved, nothing gained.

Even as people submitted to the bombardment, they

knew better. (The *Wall Street Journal* reported that just 13 percent of the people picked the O.J. trial as the most significant story of the year.) But since 70 percent of the people were relying on television for their news, they learned little or nothing of what they themselves acknowledged was significant. Like junk food, junk news fills us up and leaves no room for anything else.



DONNELLY

Source: *The Trends Journal*, Summer 1992.

Just two months before defending the attention paid by TV to O.J., Ted Koppel was sounding rather Rather-like. "We now communicate with everyone and say absolutely nothing. We have reconstructed the Tower of Babel and it is a television antenna" (*New York Times*—hereafter, NYT, 5/21/94).

Junk news is to food for thought what junk food is to real food. It has no nutritional value, but it is addictive. Our nation of junk-news junkies paid a terrible price for its habit. Lost in its reverie, the public did not notice that on every issue of real consequence, it was being disinformed, misinformed, and uninformed.