

## INFOTAINMENT'S APPEALS AND CONSEQUENCES

by Andrew O'Connor

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News entertainment, or “infotainment,” has come to dominate the news landscape in recent years, despite being sharply scorned by many traditional journalists and academics for focusing on “entertainment” rather than “news.” Increasingly, news programs have tried to make their broadcasts more “entertaining,” to gain ratings by incorporating more lighthearted presentations, human interest stories, and emotionally-tinged or charged language into newscasts. While there is still a line between a traditionally hard news approach and infotainment, the current media climate is blurring the much vaunted distinction between straight news and blatant editorialization. This piece aims to explore who consumes infotainment, how it is consumed, and what effects the rise of infotainment has had on the general American population’s conception of news and some of the key issues it reports on. I will argue that infotainment’s broad appeal is the product of a general preference for emotionally charged stories that resonates with a desire to view the world in Manichean terms of good versus evil. While some have argued that infotainment increases interest in the politics, and therefore participation in democracy, I propose that the poor quality of information provided by the medium far outweighs the benefit this provides to a select few.

“News personalities,” better known as “pundits,” now dominate the journalistic landscape. The likes of Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly, CNN’s Glenn Beck, and MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann, presenting themselves as newscasters and anchormen, now rule an environment once dominated by Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather. Thomas E. Patterson, a government professor at Harvard has noted that we are seeing the rise of soft news, a “more personality-centered”<sup>1</sup> medium in which the newscaster has become as much a part of the news as the news itself. Infotainment, then, is the portmanteau of information and entertainment. Its focus is human-interest issues, violent crime, and other topics where a public policy component is not wholly central to the story. Patterson defines hard news as being centered on a public policy component, which implies “coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life.”<sup>2</sup> Soft news, by contrast, tends to frame stories in an episodic rather than thematic manner, centering on the actions of small, easily identifiable groups and certain individuals. In contrast, a thematic frame looks at the social and/or political big picture of an issue. Reports from soft news programs “are far less likely to feature discussion of the conflict as a whole, or the circumstances surrounding it.”<sup>3</sup> They instead feature a broad, sometimes sweeping overview, which does little to explore the social and political tensions that underpin a conflict or event.

Another crucial component of infotainment is its reliance on what is best understood as a dialogical format. According to Eran Ben-Porath, professor of Communication at the Annenberg School in Philadelphia, “cable...delivers the news predominately by way of human interaction based on conversation

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, “Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy — And What News Outlets Can Do About It,” *Joan Shorenstein Center for Press, Politics, and Public Policy* (2000): 4.

<sup>2</sup> Patterson, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew A. Baum, “Circling the Wagons: Soft News and Isolationism in American Public Opinion,” *International Studies Quarterly* 48:2 (2004): 316.

rather than journalistic monolog.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike the answers-based format of more “traditional” newscasts, news presented in a dialogical format reports through questions and projected solutions often gathered from popular opinion polls, on the spot surveys and interviews with populist commentators asked to weigh in on the day’s issues. Crucial to this formula is the almost constant sense of urgency that accompanies the appearance of these polls, testimonies and rants. This means that news is broadcast live, not pre-taped. The live element, Ben-Porath proposes, is crucial to reinforce “the authority of journalists by suggesting unmediated access to the viewers...which equates liveness with an authentic representation of reality.”<sup>5</sup> Viewers are made to feel part of the story and show by playing the part of witness in an unfolding conversation, not a dictation. Since the conversation is happening before the viewers’ eyes, they are not as inclined to think it was scripted. In dialogical newscasting, sources are able to disproportionately influence and guide the tone of a story as the time for analysis is severely curtailed or outright eliminated.

Following from this, infotainment is also characterized by its tendency to be specialized. As modern media has diversified to include the Internet, satellite, extended cable and twenty-four hour news networks, “there are more channels, chances, and incentives to tailor political communication to particular identities, conditions, and tastes.”<sup>6</sup> For example, Evangelical Christian-oriented news sources, most notably the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), provide a segment of the population with faith-based commentary that reinforces existing values rather than challenging them. This results in a political fragmentation, where political agendas appear in multiple, if often non-dedicated, channels aimed at particular audiences.<sup>7</sup> This can largely be explained by the increasingly market-driven nature of the journalism industry. As corporations focus increasingly on cashing in on niche demographics, the information industry has sought to tailor news to particular aspects that will create viewer loyalty. Assuming that audience attention is “fickle” and that programs are chosen “on subject matter, personal relevance, and convenience,”<sup>8</sup> viewers are comforted by a market environment in which they are able to access and are provided with information that conforms to a familiar state of mind.

This is especially interesting when one considers that the majority of infotainment’s audience consists of people who do not consider themselves as traditionally engaged in politics. Matthew Baum, professor of Journalism at Harvard, defines these consumers as “politically inattentive individuals,” who do not “turn to traditional political news, and so are unlikely to be exposed to hard news stories about foreign affairs.”<sup>9</sup> Infotainment, instead, utilizes simplified information that allows citizens to participate in democracy from a largely populist base where information is insubstantial and the coverage is not in-depth.<sup>10</sup> Both Baum and Angela Jamison, professor of Journalism at UCLA, argue that politically

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<sup>4</sup> Eran N. Ben-Porath, “Internal Fragmentation of the News: Television news in a dialogical format and its consequences of journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 8:4 (2007): 414.

<sup>5</sup> Ben-Porath, 420.

<sup>6</sup> Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh, “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features,” *Political Communication* 16:3 (1999): 221.

<sup>7</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Blumler and Kavanagh, 218.

<sup>9</sup> Baum, “Circling the Wagons,” 315.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew A. Baum and Angela S. Jamison, “The Oprah Effect: How Soft News Helps Inattentive Citizens Vote Consistently,” *The Journal of Politics* 68:4 (2006): 946.

inattentive viewers do not decide whether to use hard or soft news, but rather decide whether to use soft news or no news at all.<sup>11</sup> As such, soft news is less an alternative news source which offers a world view that might challenge conventional news outlets, as it is a substitute primary news source for millions who do not want to or have the time to absorb what might be considered a complicated, detailed news story. Infotainment serves as a system of reporting that allows viewers to get just enough information to be able to take some sort of stand on a given issue. If political information can be made entertaining, it can be tacked onto the material mainly intended for entertainment. As a result, there is no extra cost for gaining this information.<sup>12</sup> In the end, consuming soft news does actually raise awareness about political issues in people with low political awareness.

Viewers watch infotainment because its stories are presented in an episodic format that helps simplify otherwise complex information. People who depend on infotainment often find the information given in hard news broadcasts complex and hard to comprehend. Episodic frames, on the other hand, “tend to be more compelling and accessible to politically inattentive viewers.”<sup>13</sup> An episodic focus on individuals or groups rather than on public policy issues, is easier to connect to as a viewer, and thus easier to digest. Baum also asserts that “individuals may rapidly forget the facts surrounding a given issue or policy, yet they remember how they felt about it.”<sup>14</sup> Within the framing of episodic news, emotional judgments take place over slow and distanced reasoning. One of the starkest examples of this remains the events of 9/11; many people may recall where they were when they found out and their initial shock. As 9/11 demonstrated, the visual component of news reports becomes imperative to the impact of soft news because “it is more vivid” and plays to viewers’ preference for episodic frames.<sup>15</sup> Families crying at memorial services and Bush using harsh rhetoric against those allegedly responsible can provoke strong emotional reactions, even if they have nothing to do with a policy component or looking into why 9/11 occurred. If soft news viewers can visualize events and issues through a set image rather than making an image themselves through reports and dictated analysis, it is more likely to keep their attention fixed on a story, replacing thought with anticipation and a sense of participation.

Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly is arguably the best known and controversial of the still emerging phenomenon of infotainment news personalities. O’Reilly made a name for himself and became the public face for the Fox News Network early on in his infotainment career by making controversial remarks (see below) that have earned him an equally staggering amount of admirers and critics. Although many news personalities behave like O’Reilly, I want to focus on the Fox anchor because there is already a substantial amount of academic scholarship on him.

Mike Conway, professor of Journalism at Indiana University, argues that O’Reilly uses Lee and

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<sup>11</sup> Baum and Jamison, 948.

<sup>12</sup> Baum and Jamison, 948.

<sup>13</sup> Baum, “Circling the Wagons,” 316.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew A. Baum, “Soft News and Political Knowledge: Evidence of Absence or Absence of Evidence?,” *Political Communication* 20:2 (2003): 174.

<sup>15</sup> Baum, “Soft News and Political Knowledge,” 180.

Lee's seven propaganda devices<sup>16</sup>, but "name calling is the backbone of his communication strategy."<sup>17</sup> Name-calling is an interesting art for O'Reilly, as he uses it to define and dismiss his opponents' views in one swift breath. For example, in an August 25, 2008 discussion on then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, O'Reilly used his program, *The O'Reilly Factor*, to say that Obama's pick of Joe Biden as his vice presidential candidate would be Obama's "big chance to regain momentum to persuade doubters that he is not a son of San Francisco, a cousin of George Soros, or a puppet of moveon[.org, a popular progressive website]."<sup>18</sup> O'Reilly uses well established symbology and polarizing language to condemn anyone who he believes can be branded as leaning towards a liberal political "left." O'Reilly's use of words like "son," "cousin," and "puppet," while possibly not entirely conscious, have the effect of implying that Obama is deeply connected to not only liberal ideologies, but a larger liberal political complex that defines Obama as a "type" to O'Reilly viewers.

Building on this alarmingly simplified vision of the world as "conservative" versus "liberal," or "right" versus "left," Conway also argues that O'Reilly frequently uses "fear appeals," to build a sense of urgency or alarm amongst viewers. Defining "fear appeals" as "a prominent focus on danger, a threat to life, social order or the American way of life,"<sup>19</sup> Conway argues that these alarming threats appear in more than half of O'Reilly's reports. In the September 8, 2004 airing of *The O'Reilly Factor*, O'Reilly argued that "France is considered the third most unfriendly country in the world towards America" and that "France is hurting the USA in the fight on terrorism."<sup>20</sup> Without any mention of where he was gleaning these "statistics" or "facts" or an analysis of his source's criteria for determining what is "friendly" or "unfriendly" O'Reilly is content to use sweeping characterizations to brand an entire country as either pro or anti American. Calling France "unfriendly" may seem a simple name, but within the simplified and Manichean performative space of infotainment, this name knowingly suggests that France presents opposition to or means to harm the United States. O'Reilly has been infamous for promoting Francophobia as a distinctly pro-American and conservative ideology. He has gone to great lengths to make France, the entire country, appear as a threat of America's objectives by focusing on and raising alarms about French opposition to the foreign or international policy of the American government. O'Reilly equates opposition of conservative-oriented, "American" policy with outright hatred for America, furthering the Manichean conflict and promoting a "you're either with us or against us" worldview.

<sup>16</sup> The seven devices are: name calling (labeling "to make the audience reject them [adversaries] without examining the evidence"), glittering generalities ("the use of virtue words that make the audience accept an idea or person without examining the evidence"), transfer ("using prestige or authority of one idea or person and transferring that to a different person or idea to make it acceptable or add stature to it"), testimonial (displaying "a respected person endorsing or rejecting an idea or person"), plain folks ("a person is presented as part of common folk, not elites"), card stacking ("the selective use of facts, half-truths, and or lies to convince the audience to accept or reject an idea or person"), and band wagon (implying "that because everybody approves or disapproves of an idea or person, the audience should hold the same opinion").

<sup>17</sup> Mike Conway, Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Kevin Grieves, "Villains, Victims, and the Virtuous in Bill O'Reilly's 'No-Spin Zone': Revisiting world war propaganda techniques," *Journalism Studies* 8:2 (2003): 205.

<sup>18</sup> *The O'Reilly Factor*. 2008. Fox News Network. August 25, 2008. [http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T5376888753&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=1&resultUrlKey=29\\_T5376888756&cisb=22\\_T5376888755&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=1](http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T5376888753&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=1&resultUrlKey=29_T5376888756&cisb=22_T5376888755&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=1)

<sup>19</sup> Conway, Grabe, and Grieves., 204.

<sup>20</sup> *The O'Reilly Factor*. 2004. Fox News Network. September 8, 2004. [http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T5376909873&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29\\_T5376909876&cisb=22\\_T5376909875&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=1](http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T5376909873&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=1&resultsUrlKey=29_T5376909876&cisb=22_T5376909875&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=1)

Following from this, O'Reilly and other infotainment anchors depend on creating and viewers buying into a sort of role-playing that denotes certain groups as good or evil. Where one positions particular groups or interests within this good versus evil formula is a powerful indicator of their own ideological self-identification. For example, O'Reilly generally defines academics, illegal aliens, left-wing media, non-Christians, Democrats, and government institutions as bad or evil, painting them as transgressors or threats to a well-defined American way of life.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, building on his view of the U.S. as possessing a well-established order, O'Reilly carefully uses the trope of "heroes" to equate noble and virtuous behavior with Republicans, Christians, the Bush administration, and conservative media who stand up to those interests which seek to undermine his own worldview. To witness this one need look no further than the October 17, 2007 episode of *The O'Reilly Factor*, in which O'Reilly takes aim at a group of San Francisco transgender people who dressed as nuns, went into a Catholic Church and took communion. O'Reilly appeared on air enraged by the incident, saying, "Catholics in [San Francisco] don't even have the right to worship without obscene interruption."<sup>22</sup> Equating the powerfully symbolic sexual transgression of cross dressers with the political transgressions he sees as endemic in the left, O'Reilly argued that "if far left loons gain power, watch out. They are the oppressors. They are the totalitarians... The rights of Christians and other groups that oppose the secular society mean nothing."<sup>23</sup> O'Reilly's here makes it clear who the good guys are — the Christian community, and the bad guys — secular liberals whose secular values may bring about totalitarianism. While O'Reilly may seem to create an overly simplified world view, his argument actually reveals a great deal about American culture by tapping into deep seeded American fears of fascism to support his argument, equating Christian values with Americanism, and secular values as European (read French), weak, and a step on the road to totalitarianism.

O'Reilly, like other pundits from across the political spectrum, frames news stories into "good versus evil" and "us versus them" binaries that connect with the way many Americans think and the way that questions of policy are connected to a particular position within an overly simplified political spectrum. One such example is the death penalty, where the lines between good and evil are rarely, if ever blurred. Peter Liberman, professor of political science at Queens College in New York, has examined how peoples' emotions and convictions, which pundits capitalize on, influence support for the death penalty and how their stance on that issue connects them to a larger political community. He has found that two-thirds of death penalty supporters would not change their mind even if the death penalty had no deterrent effects.<sup>24</sup> This leads to visceral and strong opinions amongst both supporters and opponents which pundits know they are able to play on to position themselves within the political landscape. Liberman notes that "because one tends to see what one wants to see, one's factual and casual beliefs are often biased by

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<sup>21</sup> Conway, Grabe, and Grievies 209.

<sup>22</sup> *The O'Reilly Factor*. 2007. Fox News Network. October 17, 2007. [http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T5376861075&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=76&resultUrlKey=29\\_T5376861082&cisb=22\\_T5376861081&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=80](http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T5376861075&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=76&resultUrlKey=29_T5376861082&cisb=22_T5376861081&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=80)

<sup>23</sup> *The O'Reilly Factor*. 2007. Fox News Network. October 17, 2007. [http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21\\_T5376861075&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=76&resultUrlKey=29\\_T5376861082&cisb=22\\_T5376861081&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=80](http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/Inacademic/results/docview/docview.do?docLinkInd=true&risb=21_T5376861075&format=GNBFI&sort=RELEVANCE&startDocNo=76&resultUrlKey=29_T5376861082&cisb=22_T5376861081&treeMax=true&treeWidth=0&csi=174179&docNo=80)

<sup>24</sup> Peter Liberman, "An Eye for an Eye: Public Support for War Against Evildoers," *International Organization* 60:3 (2006): 690.

desires and aversions.”<sup>25</sup> People are willing to block out information that contradicts strongly held inner feelings in favor of furthering their own worldviews. To say that people with passionate beliefs create their own worlds would be extreme, but infotainment and the use of wedge issues like the death penalty reveals that people will defend their position vigorously and that an appeal to a larger community of believers is a common tool. Many sources of infotainment, especially news personalities, allow people to remain insulated in a narrow world, a space shared with others but which attacks anything and anyone not fitting as wrong or as a threat to the order of that world.

News personalities in the infotainment world are careful to give the impression that evil is not to be tolerated, something Americans — like other cultures — connect with strongly. Jovan Babic’s, professor of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, has examined how ideas of tolerance and evil are deeply intertwined with how most Americans consume infotainment. Tolerance, Babic argues, “involves absorbing the attitude that others may have and act[ing] upon a definition of ‘the good’ which is different from our own.”<sup>26</sup> As Liberman explains, however, this is incrementally difficult for emotionally charged populations with highly dichotomized worldviews. “The good” Babic proposes is supported by one’s moral code, that which s/he feels is right. Intolerance, on the other hand, is a stronger ideological orientation than tolerance because “it comprises eagerness and over-diligence that surpasses mere enduring that tolerance incorporates.”<sup>27</sup> Because people act on their beliefs, for better or for worse, the advocating of tolerance or intolerance becomes an immensely important part of the larger political vision that one sees themselves as part of. News personalities tailor their words to encourage people to stand for what they believe in. They make no effort to maintain objectivity in order to maintain a moral high ground. Viewers often do take action irrationally, regardless of costs and benefits. The public often defines whom they will and will not tolerate and act vigorously on these assumptions, and news personalities are glad to help define friends and foes for their audience.

Even though one could argue that politically inactive citizens do gain some knowledge from infotainment news personalities, there is great danger in citizens consuming this sort of information. Media Matters, a nonprofit media watchdog group, has recently examined CNN’s Lou Dobbs, Fox News’ Glenn Beck (who was at CNN Headline News at the time the Media Matters report was published) and O’Reilly’s coverage of immigration. The organization has found that “Dobbs, O’Reilly, and Beck serve up a steady diet of fear, anger, and resentment on the topic of illegal immigration.”<sup>28</sup> Despite extensive coverage, these infotainment news personalities come up alarmingly short on substantial information and analysis, instead using the common “us versus them” mentality to demonize illegal immigrants. Dobbs, O’Reilly, and Beck have all virulently asserted that an illegal alien crime wave is threatening to take over the nation and ruin domestic order. The facts, however, say otherwise. A recent Harvard and University of Michigan study found “that immigrants committed fewer crimes than native-born citizens, and that a greater proportion of immigrants in a neighborhood was associated with lower rates of crime.” Building on these key findings a further study by the Immigration Policy Center found that “the incarceration

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<sup>25</sup> Liberman, 693.

<sup>26</sup> Jovan Babic, “Toleration Vs. Doctrinal Evil In Our Time,” *The Journal of Ethics* 8:3 (2004): 227.

<sup>27</sup> Babic, 232.

<sup>28</sup> Media Matters Action Network, “Fear and Loathing in Prime Time: Immigration Myths and Cable News,” [http://mediamattersaction.org/reports/fearandloathing/online\\_version](http://mediamattersaction.org/reports/fearandloathing/online_version)

rate was five times higher for the native-born than for the foreign-born.”<sup>29</sup> Despite this, O’Reilly and infotainment personalities on the conservative and libertarian right continue to compare illegal aliens to terrorists, attempting to fix the public’s fear of terrorism to the extremely complex issue of immigration. O’Reilly has even gone so far as to argue that “local authorities...should be part of homeland security, were to be more vigilant on criminal illegal aliens, notice the word criminal, and track them harder, the Fort Dix thing [a thwarted plot to kill U.S. soldiers] would have been caught sooner,” in June of last year.<sup>30</sup> While the means for controlling the “immigration problem” vary from pundit to pundit, O’Reilly’s hyperbole points to a shared belief in illegal immigrants as “criminal” and a problem that must be dealt with.

The shows that infotainment news personalities host also fail to represent the United States’ racial and gender diversity. None of these cable news personalities are minorities, and only 17% percent of them are female.<sup>31</sup> Another Media Matters report compared the percentage of minority guests the week before the Don Imus controversy<sup>32</sup>, the week of it, and the week after it. The study found that before the Imus scandal, white guests made up over half of all the guests on infotainment shows—regardless of its supposed position on the left or right of the American political spectrum. In fact, at least 90% of all guests on the shows hosted by Keith Olbermann, Sean Hannity, Chris Matthews, Larry King, and Bill O’Reilly’s were white. African-American guests made up less than a tenth of guests. Latinos, Asian Americans, and Arab-Americans, represented an even smaller portion. When the Imus scandal hit, African-American representation went up significantly on *Hannity and Colmes* to 43% on *Larry King Live* they rose to 35% while more than half of *Hardball*’s guests were African-American. On those shows that depend more on the ranting of charismatic “anchormen” and less on guest appearances the representation of African-Americans slightly increased — on *Countdown* to 14% and *The O’Reilly Factor* to 13%. Representation of other races was virtually non-existent during the scandal, which was portrayed as an example of racism against blacks rather than symptomatic of larger structural racism in America. The week after the Imus scandal, the numbers mostly returned to those before the scandal.<sup>33</sup>

The general absence of other races and women is a strange phenomenon that seems endemic to infotainment as a medium. The conspicuous lack of Latinos in infotainment is of particular interest, as “the U.S. Census estimated that Hispanics made up 14 percent of the American population; given patterns of population growth, that number is undoubtedly higher today,”<sup>34</sup> Yet infotainment shows continue to bury the presence of a Latino population as a key demographic and population within the U.S. Overall female representation reveals a similar picture. Female guests have never broken the halfway point on the networks, even during the three weeks of the Imus scandal. Only the week after the scandal did women made up 51% of guests on *The O’Reilly Factor*. If this is how infotainment news personalities choose to

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<sup>29</sup> Media Matters Action Network, “Fear and Loathing in Prime Time.”

<sup>30</sup> Media Matters Action Network, “Fear and Loathing in Prime Time.”

<sup>31</sup> Media Matters Action Network, “Locked Out: The Lack of Gender and Ethnic Diversity on Cable News Continues,” <http://mediamatters.org/items/200705070003>.

<sup>32</sup> The Don Imus controversy refers to the event in April 2007 when Don Imus called the Rutgers University women’s basketball team “nappy headed hoers.” This led to Imus’ morning show being cancelled.

<sup>33</sup> Media Matters Action Network, “Locked Out.”

<sup>34</sup> Media Matters Action Network, “Locked Out.”

represent and envision America, viewers are left with the notion that America is a largely homogenous white nation. If this lack of minorities is not problematic enough, the strategic placing of minority guests when a minority-centered controversy arises not only presents a false sense of diversity, but undermines the real issues of the day by presenting racism as anomalous rather than symptomatic of deeper inter-cultural divides.

News personalities create echo chambers for their audiences. Baum's research on isolationism and soft news found that consuming infotainment actually makes "politically inattentive Americans...far more receptive to isolationist messages than their highly attentive counterparts."<sup>35</sup> Individuals are much more comfortable with information that reinforces their own opinions and often will not stand for any counterarguments. People that consume infotainment are not creating discussions and exchanging ideas. They stick to their comfort zone "because they anticipate finding reinforcement for their...worldviews," and to be taken out of it would prove too traumatic for them to handle.<sup>36</sup> Reality, to many infotainment viewers, is what they want reality to be. News personalities are more than happy to assure them of such realities. Patterson argues that "the news is increasingly based on what will interest an audience rather than what the audience needs to know."<sup>37</sup> News personalities, and more importantly the people that write their checks, are well aware of this, and will sacrifice vital information in the elusive quest for ratings. Bill O'Reilly has to keep his name relevant somehow, so he and his ilk do not deviate from what their audiences come to expect from them. These programs fail to take a look at the more complex issues of current events, instead watering everything down into easy-to-follow narratives that galvanize, rather than question, already firmly rooted biases.

The dialogical format also presents major problems. It gives the impression that it democratizes the news by allowing the audience to feel more involved, but Ben-Porath says that the format results in "the voices of ordinary people are 'ventriloquized' rather than directly heard."<sup>38</sup> What he means by "ventriloquized" is that the experts on the show claim to be representing the people, but often come off as caricatures that do not have an important or relevant message. Agendas are misinterpreted as information you need to know. The live nature increases spontaneity, but at the expense of fact-checking, which is a crucial component of journalism. Live television is not suitable for fact-checking due to its time and mental demands.<sup>39</sup> News personalities need their content, and they need it now. The "need to grant the audience a feeling of participation" overcomes ethics and standards.<sup>40</sup> Postulating many questions, as opposed to actively finding the answers, does not serve the public interest. The guests news personalities usually bring on in these dialogical-based shows tend to give power to government elites. This aspect runs under the illusion of democracy, and the diversity is highly misleading. A conversation of elites does not inform nor represent the citizens. As a result of shifting from demanding answers to asking questions, "factuality is constructed directly by those powerful enough to have access to the open airwaves."<sup>41</sup> News

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<sup>35</sup> Baum, "Circling the Wagons," 318.

<sup>36</sup> Baum, "Circling the Wagons," 320.

<sup>37</sup> Patterson, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ben-Porath, 424.

<sup>39</sup> Ben-Porath, 422.

<sup>40</sup> Ben-Porath, 423.

<sup>41</sup> Ben-Porath, 424.

personalities, then, cannot be a voice of the people, but rather the voice of who pays their bills. Politicians embrace this, as they favor dialogical-based shows because they provide a friendlier environment.<sup>42</sup> They can avoid journalists who scrutinize their every word and ask the tough questions, thus thwarting the prime function of journalism — to keep our leaders, and increasingly the special interests more than willing to influence our leaders, in check.

Network executives push for softer content to bring in a larger audience to news. Infotainment programming, especially programs anchored by news personalities, make up a great part of the news today, leaving few alternatives for news and allowing citizens to divide into populations that reaffirm ideological beliefs rather than challenging them to tolerate other ideas and world views. Soft news stories on television have dramatically increased from 35% in 1980 to over half today while regular audiences for many forms of media have steadily declined since 1993.<sup>43</sup> Sensationalism and network heads use of it to their advantage is symptomatic of a changing idea of what “news” is and what purpose it serves in American society and culture. As networks and news organizations aim “to ‘own’ the big story so that people who normally watch another network...turn to yours for the duration of the story and hopefully longer,” The depth, analysis and interconnectivity of events continues to be glossed over by a demand for more sensational imagery, on demand coverage of events and little discussion between different perspectives.<sup>44</sup> As viewers flock to who has it first, whether or not they have it right, news continues to change from an emphasis on dialogue between those involved in a story and towards an emphasis on getting it first. However, the intense focus on sensational matters can backfire, as Thomas Patterson has argued, “sensationalism draws people’s attention in the first instance but endless sensationalism may ultimately dull it.”<sup>45</sup> As people become burned out by the increasing volume of information, they actually begin to tune the news out. News personalities play an important role in constructing and presenting the news within a democracy. Without a sense of some binding journalistic principles, a belief in the need to guide the public towards the truth, soft news falls short of providing viewers with relevant information, instead providing entertaining noise. The dominating presence of cable news where these personalities live only makes this problem worse.

While audiences being at least somewhat engaged through the pundit commentary appears positive, when combined with sensationalism, selective coverage, and the illusion of dialogical participation, infotainment largely fails to illuminate, but rather leave many people in the dark. Pundits’ reliance on binary “good vs. evil” thinking leaves no room for gray areas in stories, which can rob viewers of valuable nuance and perspective that forces us to think through and about others.

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<sup>42</sup> Ben-Porath, 417.

<sup>43</sup> Patterson, 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> Bonnie M. Anderson, *News Flash: Journalism, Infotainment, and the Bottom-Line Business of Broadcast News* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 10.

<sup>45</sup> Patterson, 8.

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