



ALL IN THE FAMILY

NBC AND THE MANUFACTURING OF DONALD TRUMP

BY JENNIFER L. POZNER | ART BY ALEX GREGORY

Clever producers manufactured [a] story about a billionaire whose empire was, in actuality, crumbling at the very same time he took the job, the salary, and ownership rights to do a reality show. *The Apprentice* was a scam put forth to the public in exchange for ratings. We were “entertaining,” and the story about Donald Trump and his stature fell into some bizarre public record as “truth.” ... Now that the lines of fiction and reality have blurred to the horrifying extent that they have, those involved in the media must have their day of reckoning [about] how complicit the media and social-media outlets have been in getting us to where we are now.

—Emmy-winning executive producer Bill Pruitt (*The Amazing Race*, *Deadliest Catch*), who worked on *The Apprentice*, Seasons 1–2. 12/21/16, VanityFair.com

Donald Trump may be destructively ignorant about geopolitics, domestic policy, immigration, and “the cyber,” but never underestimate his brilliance at selling snake oil. A skilled propagandist, he learned the art of spinning bigotry and failure into flattering narratives at the feet of Mark Burnett, creator and fellow executive producer of NBC’s business game shows *The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice*. Twin odes to corporate capitalism and the Trump brand, the franchise framed the sketchy real estate CEO as a paragon of wealth, success, and authority, never letting viewers know he drove multiple companies and casinos into bankruptcy, was sued for fraud, and regularly stiffed his vendors. For 14 seasons from 2004–2015, millions of Americans welcomed this Trump into their living rooms, learning to see him as the ultimate role model, a politically incorrect straight shooter who owns the keys to the American dream.

If we taught critical media literacy in America, the phrase “President Trump” would be a punchline to a joke about narcissism or Cheetos. Instead, as former *Apprentice* producer Bill Pruitt told *Vanity Fair*, enough of us bought into the show’s “scam” that their star was able to launch a presidential bid.

How did reality TV’s most self-aggrandizing troll become Antagonizer in Chief? There’s plenty of blame to go around, including backlash against the first Black president, the Supreme Court dismantling the Voting Rights Act, and a working class conned into believing a plutocrat whose catch phrase is “You’re fired!” has the skill or desire to fix income inequality. Yet Trump couldn’t have capitalized on these symptoms if his diseased campaign hadn’t been bred—and its contagion spread—by corporate media. The industry’s collusion played out in myriad ways. Fox News cheerleaders functioned as a broadcast wing of the Trump campaign. The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today* covered the political horse race in nearly 60 percent of front-page election stories, virtually ignoring policy issues, according to a FAIR study. Hillary Clinton faced predictably misogynistic double standards, while journalists normalized Trump’s white nationalist extremism and sexually predatory history.

Media complicity is among the biggest factors in Trump’s rise to power and one network in particular set the Trump train on a collision course with democracy. NBC news and MSNBC played a considerable role in Trump’s ascent, and while it’s important to examine the role journalism

played in Trump's victory, it's crucial to understand why he was ever considered a credible candidate in the first place. For those answers we must turn to NBC Universal's corporate family—specifically their entertainment division.

THE CULT ESCAPEE

Let's start with Pruitt, whose scathing post-election manifesto reminded fellow TV creators that “people are buying our crap. Make it entertaining, yes. But make it real. Give them the truth or pay the consequences.” If each key player in the NBCU/Trump drama is a specific family member, then Pruitt is the adult escapee of an abusive cult who comes clean about prior bad acts now that he's free, like Fred Phelps's kids rebelling against the Westboro Baptist Church. The former *Apprentice* producer told *Vanity Fair*, “We are masterful storytellers and we did our job well. What's shocking to me is how quickly and decisively the world bought it. Did we think this clown, this buffoon with the funny hair, would ever become a world leader? Not once. Ever.”

This wasn't Pruitt's first Election 2016 bomb-toss. In response to October's infamous “grab 'em by the pussy” hot mic video, he tweeted, “As a producer on seasons 1 & 2 of #theapprentice I assure you: when it comes to the #trump-tapes there are far worse. #justthebeginning.” Following Pruitt's self-described “Tweet Throat moment,” hundreds of news outlets reported that raw footage captures Trump spewing damning ethnic slurs and sexually harassing female contestants and staff, according to anonymous *Apprentice* insiders.

At the time, I described those tapes as political forensic evidence that NBC owed the American people—especially undecided voters—yet NBC ignored pressure from the press and the public to do its civic duty. By December, actor Tom Arnold told KIRO Radio he'd seen “outtakes to *The Apprentice* [in which Trump] says every bad thing ever, every offensive, racist thing ever” distributed by *Apprentice* staffers years ago as a joke. “It was him sitting in that chair saying the N-word, saying the C-word, calling his son a retard, just being so mean to his own children,” Arnold said.

According to the Institute for the Study of Citizens and Politics, a small percentage of voters switched to Trump at the last minute. When we consider that Trump won the electoral college by just 10,704 votes in Michigan and 22,779 in Wisconsin, it's reasonable to assume some voters might have chosen differently had they heard the candidate calling his own child a slur and using virulently racist and misogynist rhetoric. Like FBI Director James Comey's letter about Clinton's emails, these *Apprentice* outtakes could have made the difference between swearing in America's first female head of state and empowering an avowed sexual predator and white supremacist.

THE GODFATHER


As we go to press, the #TrumpTapes remain protected by a disingenuous corporate circle jerk. NBC insisted it can't legally release footage, passing the buck to Burnett. Sorry,

Burnett claimed, it belongs to MGM, which acquired his production company in 2014–15. MGM said contractual agreements tied their hands. (MGM's president? Mark Burnett.) All this legalese was a flimsy deflection: No one divulges confidential, controversial material with their names attached, they leak it anonymously. If Burnett wanted footage available, we'd have all seen it before November 8. Instead, the media mogul (who once sued a *Survivor* fan for leaking show information) reportedly threatened staffers with a \$5 million lawsuit to discourage leaks. He denied doing so, but he also released a statement claiming, “I am not now and have never been a supporter of Donald Trump's candidacy,” and “I reject the hatred, division, and misogyny” of his campaign—only to agree soon after to organize Trump's inaugural entertainment. So, you know, maybe grain-of-salt anything this man says.

No one at NBCU bears more responsibility for Trump's ascent than Burnett, the Machiavellian godfather pulling all the strings, orchestrating family drama, and keeping poisonous secrets on lockdown. His “I reject Trump”—no, wait, I'm running his inauguration!—bait and switch is hardly surprising. As one of reality TV's most successful impresarios, Burnett has become exceptionally rich by, essentially, lying for a living. The industry he helped create is built on deception: for example, that reality TV is real (and not a highly misrepresentative fiction using real people as story elements), or that it exists due to viewer demand (not because it's 50 to 75 percent cheaper to produce than scripted programming and comes with sweet, sweet product-placement cash). If Trump convinced many to believe that he alone can fix America's problems, it's largely because he became a master storyteller under Burnett's tutelage, studying since 2004 how his team could make viewers believe anything about anyone through dishonest Frankenbite editing, manipulative framing, selective casting, and behind-the-scenes dirty tricks.

Burnett pretending to reject Trump's misogyny is especially laughable considering how intentionally he built misogyny into *The Apprentice*'s DNA. He consistently portrayed female contestants as intellectually inferior, having to flash their belly-buttons or drop their skirts in sales challenges to overcome their male counterparts' supposedly innate advantage. (“The early victories by women on *The Apprentice* were... dependent on their sex appeal,” Trump admitted in *How To Get Rich*.) Burnett also helped to catapult the minstrel-era Angry Black Woman trope into one of reality TV's most entrenched racist stereotypes, by representing the first season's only Black female cast member as a “vicious,” “repulsive,” “angry bitch” who “played the race card.” (I hear the apologists already: *Oh, but, Jenn, Omarosa Manigault, the woman you're talking about was a Trump surrogate. Surely she wouldn't be taking an outreach role in his administration if she had been treated that badly!* Unpacking Manigault would take at least a full essay.)

If Trump used the same language and behavior in his companies that he displayed and encouraged in his fake TV boardroom, he'd be vulnerable to class action lawsuits. Yet Burnett framed content legally defined as sexual harassment and



gender- and race-based employment discrimination as a normal, acceptable, even important business practice. A decade of such representations groomed millions of future voters to believe that women and people of color are less competent than white men, who are natural leaders; business ethics are a joke; gratuitous offensiveness is admirable honesty; and Trump's judgment matters more than anyone else's.

[The Apprentice] groomed millions of future voters to believe that women and people of color are less competent than white men, who are natural leaders; business ethics are a joke; gratuitous offensiveness is admirable honesty; and Trump's judgment matters more than anyone else's.

THE SPOILED NEPHEW

If NBCU's reality programming emboldened Trump to seek office, their comedy properties aided his power grab.

On *Saturday Night Live*, Alec Baldwin's Trump caricature and Kate McKinnon's November 12 cold-open, singing "Hallelujah" as a mournful Hillary Clinton, were lights in the darkness during and after the presidential debates and election. But like a spoiled nephew who squanders his potential, *SNL* waited far too long to get its act together. Yes, Lin-Manuel Miranda called Trump a "piece of [bleeped] shit" in his monologue. And sure, McKinnon's post-election "Hillary Actually" sketch begged electoral college members to "vote for literally anyone else" because Trump "doesn't know how the government works."

Too little, too late.

In the weeks leading up to the election, the future leader of the free world banged out fifth-grade-reading-level rage-tweets about how it's "Time to retire the boring and unfunny show... Media rigging election!" Perhaps the president was just rewatching the painfully laughless, universally panned episode he hosted in November, 2015. Though *SNL* previously subjected candidates to substantive critique, Trump's episode lacked any semblance of bite. Trading relevance for ratings, *SNL* committed a cardinal comedic sin: they pulled their punches, vomiting up stilted sketches where President Trump's 2018 cabinet tells him that "prosperity is at an all-time high. In two years, you really made America great again." Syria is fine, ISIS is destroyed, and Mexico's president gladly hands over a giant check for the wall.

At a crucial time in the GOP primaries, while voters were still deciding, NBC's jesters humanized a racist, xenophobic, misogynistic fascist, edging him closer to the Republican nomination. When America needed satirical heft, *SNL* abandoned its duty to expose the Emperor's new clothes. Sadly, the joke was on us—especially when Larry David fake-heckled, "Trump's a racist!," adding "I heard if I yelled that, they'd give me \$5,000." David's stunt not only mocked protesters gathered outside 30 Rock, it defanged even the idea that Americans were outraged at *SNL* legitimizing a candidate so bigoted that white supremacist groups were using him as a recruitment tool.

After the damage was done, *SNL*'s fog lifted and its satire started to become meaningful again. Lorne Michaels claims it became ap-

propriate to hit harder only after Trump won. I don't buy it; that's not how the show has previously operated—Sarah Palin, for instance, was just a nominee when, in an October 2008 episode, an extremely pregnant Amy Poehler rapped about the GOP veep hopeful being a vapid lightweight while standing *right next to her*. So, what motivated this shift: Pangs of conscience? A dawning realization of its role in

this crisis? No matter. If *SNL* (and NBCU's news operations) had been critical when it counted, Kate McKinnon might not have needed to beg electors to save America from itself.

THE FAMILY DOG

Speaking of sorry excuses for comedy, who can forget Jimmy Fallon—the overenthusiastic family dog who drinks from the toilet and humps your leg when you're trying to read—playfully tousling the Republican nominee's hair in one of the hackiest media moments of the election cycle? By the time Trump brought his roadkill combover to NBC's *Tonight Show*, he'd already made assassination threats against Hillary Clinton, attacked the Gold Star parents of a slain Muslim American soldier, proposed banning Muslim immigrants, called Black Lives Matter "terrorists," and used rhetoric so racist it had inspired violence, harassment, and hate crimes. But, hey, funny hair! Lemme play with it! Even for a comedian as blandly nonconfrontational as Fallon, this anemic bit was shameful.

Sometimes it takes an outsider to reveal a family's dysfunction. When Fallon fell down on the job, comedian Samantha Bee, irreverent host of TBS's *Full Frontal*, stepped up. Many Americans "think playing footsie with fringe hate groups isn't a disqualifier from... the presidency," she asserted, "because that's the message they get from entertainment giants like NBC, which gladly nurtured Trump's celebrity....tacitly condon[ing] a race-baiting demagogue." With NBC's treacly #TheMoreYouKnow graphic punctuating her monologue, Bee threw every punch *SNL* and Fallon pulled in 2015–16 right back at their corporate parents: "To their credit, NBC did sever ties with Trump after he called Mexicans rapists. If by 'severing ties' you mean inviting him on their flagship comedy programs to show millions of Americans what a fun guy he is," she continued. "Here's a thought: When Holocaust survivors are telling you, 'Hey, this guy gives me déjà vu,' maybe don't invite him into your house to play with your adorable children," she advised, cutting to Fallon's hair-mussing disgrace.

THE UNDERESTIMATED MIDDLE CHILD

One notable exception has emerged amid NBC's lazy, play-it-safe approach to political comedy. In regular deep-dive "A Closer Look"

segments, *Late Night with Seth Meyers* has skewered Trump with a vigor more often associated with HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Though Meyers and Fallon are former *SNL* wunderkinds, Meyers distinguished himself as the underestimated middle child who grows into a powerful partner in breaking family silence, playing smarter, and respecting the stakes more fully than his *SNL* kin.

After the election, disgusted that “the national news media has been bending over backwards to try to pretend” that this is “normal” and Trump doesn’t “pose a unique threat,” Meyers humored pundits’ demands to give him a “fresh start.” Fine, he shrugged, “Let’s give him a chance” and “see if he can surprise us.” Cut to the announcement that Breitbart News editor and “alt-right” hatemonger Steve Bannon will be Trump’s chief strategist. “Well, we gave him a chance. Bye, chance! Thanks for stopping by! Good to see you, chance,” Meyers sighed. “A quick side note to everyone referring to Bannon as ‘controversial’: He’s not ‘controversial,’ he’s a white nationalist and an anti-Semite. Don’t talk about him like he’s pineapple on pizza.”

THE SMARMY TROPHY HUSBAND

How has NBCU made amends? In 2015, after Trump called Mexicans rapists, drug dealers, and criminals, they canceled his beauty pageants and fired him as *Celebrity Apprentice* host. Once Handsy McGrabsalot traded NBC’s fake boardroom for the White House, all Burnett had to do to raise the bar was not replace him with another sexual predator. Easy, right? Womp, womp. On January 2, *The New Celebrity Apprentice* debuted with actor-turned-governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the new trophy husband with the history of abuse no one talks about, who makes female relatives uncomfortable at family gatherings. Clearly, the network hopes we won’t totally recall the Gropinator’s decades-long history of sexual assault and harassment, investigated in explosive detail by the *Los Angeles Times* in 2003. With only the season premiere airing by press time, it’s unclear whether Schwarzenegger will increase or terminate the show’s on-screen misogyny.

THE MERCENARY PATRIARCH

Forbes estimates that the president-elect will bank \$7.4 million by retaining his *Apprentice* executive producer credit; a regulatory disclosure put his total franchise earnings at \$213 million in 2015. “I have NOTHING to do with *The Apprentice* except for fact that I conceived it with Mark B & have a big stake in it. Will devote ZERO TIME!” Trump tweeted, managing to both lie and expose the lie in 140 characters. The conflicts of interest involved with a sitting president owning up to a 50 percent stake in an NBC/MGM franchise, receiving international licensing fees, and getting a cut of all product-placement revenue (MGM hasn’t confirmed if those terms have changed) have nothing to do with how much time he spends on the series, and everything to do with how much MGM, NBCU, Comcast, and advertisers may spend to influence the executive producer-turned-POTUS. (Trump promised to address his business-related conflicts in a December 15 press conference, which he then canceled.)

In early seasons, Fortune 500 companies paid upward of \$2 million per episode to integrate their brands into *Apprentice* plotlines; by 2011, product-placement costs skyrocketed to \$5–\$9 million per *Celebrity Apprentice* episode, according to *Ad Age*. Schwarzenegger’s two-hour premiere was a glorified infomercial for Tyra Beauty and Trident gum. These embedded advertising deals not only make Trump richer—they now represent a backdoor opportunity for private-equity firms, defense contractors, foreign companies, or any corporation wanting tax breaks, deregulation, or other favors to cozy up to the Trump administration. As *CNN Money* reports, this “presents a thorny situation for Comcast/NBCUniversal.”

Thorny doesn’t begin to cover it. Media justice advocates have antitrust concerns about Comcast, which produces content through NBCU and distributes it as the country’s largest broadcasting and cable company and internet provider. Comcast, the mercenary patriarch obsessed with growing the family’s wealth at all costs, has spent millions fighting to destroy net neutrality and shepherd anti-competitive media mergers. The danger Comcast poses to the free flow of information will be drastically compounded now that Trump, whose finances are tied up with the media giant’s, will have the power to set telecommunications policy.

And what of the frightening implications for freedom of the press posed by a POTUS who is also an MGM/NBCU/Comcast employee? Conflicts of interest will be astronomical for NBC News, MSNBC, CNBC, and Telemundo, tasked with reporting on and analyzing the administration of a president who is on their parent company’s payroll. Any surprise that NBC recently hired outgoing Fox News anchor and White Santa believer Megyn Kelly?

It can take intense therapy to heal after being raised in an unhealthy family that enables a privileged son with narcissistic personality disorder. As news and culture consumers and as citizens, media literacy is the therapy we’ll need to make sense of media treatment of the Trump administration, and survive and resist the next four years. As *Media Matters* recently reported, “NBC Is Building a Trump Normalization Machine.” The best way to rage against that machine is to support media literacy education, and get involved with media justice groups advocating the public interest in telecom policy. It may not turn back the clock to a pre-*Apprentice* time, but holding NBCU responsible for putting money and ratings above an ethical, healthy democracy would be a step in the right direction. **b**

JENNIFER L. POZNER is a media critic, and media literacy speaker. She is the founder of Women In Media & News and the author of *Reality Bites Back*. She has been published in the *New York Times*, *Ms.*, *The Nation*, *Politico*, and other outlets. She is planning a book on media complicity in Trump’s rise to power.

Copyright of Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Pop Culture is the property of Bitch Media and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.