

## **Addicted to Nonsense By Chris Hedges Nov 2009**

Will Tiger Woods finally talk to the police? Who will replace Oprah? (Not that Oprah can ever be replaced, of course.) And will Michael and Tareq Salahi, the couple who crashed President Barack Obama's first state dinner, command the hundreds of thousands of dollars they want for an exclusive television interview? Can Levi Johnston, father of former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin's grandson, get his wish to be a contestant on "Dancing With the Stars"?

The chatter that passes for news, the gossip that is peddled by the windbags on the airwaves, the noise that drowns out rational discourse, and the timidity and cowardice of what is left of the newspaper industry reflect our flight into collective insanity. We stand on the cusp of one of the most seismic and disturbing dislocations in human history, one that is radically reconfiguring our economy as it is the environment, and our obsessions revolve around the trivial and the absurd.

What really matters in our lives — the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the steady deterioration of the dollar, the mounting foreclosures, the climbing unemployment, the melting of the polar ice caps and the awful reality that once the billions in stimulus money run out next year we will be bereft and broke — doesn't fit into the cheerful happy talk that we mainline into our brains. We are enraptured by the revels of a dying civilization. Once reality shatters the airy edifice, we will scream and yell like petulant children to be rescued, saved and restored to comfort and complacency. There will be no shortage of demagogues, including buffoons like Sarah Palin, who will oblige. We will either wake up to face our stark new limitations, to retreat from imperial projects and discover a new simplicity, as well as a new humility, or we will stumble blindly toward catastrophe and neofeudalism.

Celebrity worship has banished the real from public discourse. And the adulation of celebrity is pervasive. The frenzy around political messiahs, or the devotion of millions of viewers to Oprah, is all part of the yearning to see ourselves in those we worship. We seek to be like them. We seek to make them like us. If Jesus and "The Purpose Driven Life" won't make us a celebrity, then Tony Robbins or positive psychologists or reality television will. We are waiting for our cue to walk onstage and be admired and envied, to become known and celebrated. Nothing else in life counts.

We yearn to stand before the camera, to be noticed and admired. We build pages on social networking sites devoted to presenting our image to the world. We seek to control how others think of us. We define our worth solely by our visibility. We live in a world where not to be seen, in some sense, is to not exist. We pay lifestyle advisers to help us look and feel like celebrities, to build around us the set for the movie of our own life. Martha Stewart constructed her financial empire, when she wasn't engaged in insider trading, telling women how to create a set design for the perfect home. The realities within the home, the actual family relationships, are never addressed. Appearances make everything whole. Plastic surgeons, fitness gurus, diet doctors, therapists, life coaches, interior designers and fashion consultants all, in essence, promise to make us happy, to make us celebrities. And happiness comes, we are assured, with how we look, with the acquisition of wealth and power, or at least the appearance of it. Glossy magazines like *Town & Country* cater to the absurd pretensions of the very rich to be celebrities.

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They are photographed in expensive designer clothing inside the lavishly decorated set pieces that are their homes. The route to happiness is bound up in how skillfully we present ourselves to the world. We not only have to conform to the dictates of this manufactured vision, but we also have to project an unrelenting optimism and happiness. Hedonism and wealth are openly worshiped on Wall Street as well as on shows such as “The Hills,” “Gossip Girl,” “Sex and the City,” “My Super Sweet 16” and “The Real Housewives of (whatever bourgeois burg happens to be in vogue).”

The American oligarchy — 1 percent of whom control more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined — are the characters we most envy and watch on television. They live and play in multimillion-dollar mansions. They marry models or professional athletes. They are chauffeured in stretch limos. They rush from fashion shows to movie premieres to fabulous resorts. They have surgically enhanced, perfect bodies and are draped in designer clothes that cost more than some people make in a year. This glittering life is held before us like a beacon. This life, we are told, is the most desirable, the most gratifying. And this is the life we want. Greed is good, we believe, because one day through our acquisitions we will become the elite. So let the rest of the bastards suffer.

The working class, comprising tens of millions of struggling Americans, are locked out of television’s gated community. They are mocked, even as they are tantalized, by the lives of excess they watch on the screen in their living rooms. Almost none of us will ever attain these lives of wealth and power. Yet we are told that if we want it badly enough, if we believe sufficiently in ourselves, we too can have everything. We are left, when we cannot adopt these impossible lifestyles as our own, with feelings of inferiority and worthlessness. We have failed where others have succeeded. We consume these countless lies daily. We believe the false promises that if we spend more money, if we buy this brand or that product, if we vote for this candidate, we will be respected, envied, powerful, loved and protected. The flamboyant lives of celebrities and the outrageous characters on television, movies, professional wrestling and sensational talk shows are peddled to us, promising to fill up the emptiness in our own lives. Celebrity culture encourages everyone to think of themselves as potential celebrities, as possessing unique if unacknowledged gifts. Faith in ourselves, in a world of make-believe, is more important than reality. Reality, in fact, is dismissed and shunned as an impediment to success, a form of negativity. The New Age mysticism and pop psychology of television personalities and evangelical pastors, along with the array of self-help best-sellers penned by motivational speakers, psychiatrists and business tycoons, peddle this fantasy. Reality is condemned in these popular belief systems as the work of Satan, as defeatist, as negativity or as inhibiting our inner essence and power. Those who question, those who doubt, those who are critical, those who are able to confront reality, along with those who grasp the hollowness and danger of celebrity culture, are condemned for their pessimism or intellectualism.

The illusionists who shape our culture, and who profit from our incredulity, hold up the gilded cult of Us. Popular expressions of religious belief, personal empowerment, corporatism, political participation and self-definition argue that all of us are special, entitled and unique. All of us, by tapping into our inner reserves of personal will and undiscovered talent, by visualizing what we want, can achieve, and deserve to achieve, happiness, fame and success.

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This relentless message cuts across ideological lines. This mantra has seeped into every aspect of our lives. We are all entitled to everything. And because of this self-absorption, and deep self-delusion, we have become a country of child-like adults who speak and think in the inane gibberish of popular culture.

Celebrities who come from humble backgrounds are held up as proof that anyone can be adored by the world. These celebrities, like saints, are examples that the impossible is always possible. Our fantasies of belonging, of fame, of success and of fulfillment are projected onto celebrities. These fantasies are stoked by the legions of those who amplify the culture of illusion, who persuade us that the shadows are real. The juxtaposition of the impossible illusions inspired by celebrity culture and our “insignificant” individual achievements, however, is leading to an explosive frustration, anger, insecurity and invalidation. It is fostering a self-perpetuating cycle that drives the frustrated, alienated individual with even greater desperation and hunger away from reality, back toward the empty promises of those who seduce us, who tell us what we want to hear. The worse things get, the more we beg for fantasy. We ingest these lies until our faith and our money run out. And when we fall into despair we medicate ourselves, as if the happiness we have failed to find in the hollow game is our deficiency. And, of course, we are told it is.

I spent two years traveling the country to write a book on the Christian right called “American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America.” I visited former manufacturing towns where for many the end of the world is no longer an abstraction. Many have lost hope. Fear and instability have plunged the working class into profound personal and economic despair, and, not surprisingly, into the arms of demagogues and charlatans of the radical Christian right who offer a belief in magic, miracles and the fiction of a utopian Christian nation. Unless we rapidly re-enfranchise these dispossessed workers, insert them back into the economy, unless we give them hope, these demagogues will rise up to take power. Time is running out. The poor can dine out only so long on illusions. Once they grasp that they have been betrayed, once they match the bleak reality of their future with the fantasies they are fed, once their homes are foreclosed and they realize that the jobs they lost are never coming back, they will react with a fury and vengeance that will snuff out the remains of our anemic democracy and usher in a new dark age.

Chris Hedges, who is a senior fellow at The Nation Institute and who [wrote] a weekly column for Truthdig that appears on Mondays, is the author of “Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle.”

Chris Hedges / TruthDig

Truthdig is on hiatus. Our archive of 15 years of award-winning independent journalism is available for free.

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March 27, 2020

Statement From Striking Truthdig Workers  
by CounterPunch News Service

On Wednesday night, amid reports that much of the country was going into quarantine indefinitely, Truthdig's staff received an email with the subject line "Re: Truthdig." The email was to inform us that Truthdig LLC was being dissolved and that our positions at the publication had been terminated. Chris Hedges, the site's most widely read columnist, was among those fired, despite the fact that he raised grant money to cover his own salary.

"Thank you for all you've done at Truthdig," an attached form letter read. "We really appreciate your contributions. We did great work together. We wish you the best in your future endeavors. Be well and stay safe."

Two weeks prior, we had begun a work stoppage at the website to protest unfair labor conditions, promising to return to work if Truthdig's publisher, Zuade Kaufman, committed to negotiate with us in good faith. She did not. Instead, she opted to disable reader comments across the site and place Truthdig on "hiatus" during a global pandemic. Now we were learning that Kaufman planned to shutter the publication completely. Her goal, which she seems determined to pursue at any cost, is to eject co-owner and Editor in Chief Robert Scheer from the company without honoring the terms of their operating agreement.

The email was addressed from an anonymous sender listed only as "Truthdig HR." Here it is worth noting that during Truthdig's run of some 15 years, Kaufman failed to establish a human resources department in any functional sense, leaving her free to overstep her bounds and ignore the rights of others with impunity. This year, she began adding "CEO" to "Publisher" in her sign-off, and prior to our work stoppage, she was planning to appoint herself editor in chief—each act a further violation of her agreement with Scheer.

Before permanently suspending the site's operations and laying off her workforce, Kaufman did manage to post a story titled "Open Letter from Truthdig's Publisher & CEO: Breaking My Silence." While we have previously addressed its many falsehoods, we feel compelled to acknowledge its profound cynicism in light of everything that has happened at Truthdig since its publication.

In language thick with innuendo, Kaufman suggests that she and other female employees have been victims of Scheer's bullying and harassment. She offers neither specifics about his behavior nor any proof of his transgressions. She also neglects to mention that nine of the 15 Truthdig staffers and writers participating in our work stoppage are women, including several members of the copy desk, all of which joined in solidarity last week.

Kaufman asserts that it is her dream to create a "democratic culture and just society." That dream appears to end at Truthdig's doors. This is a publisher who has, on at least one occasion, falsified a female employee's complaint without her knowledge as part of a legal effort to intimidate Scheer and

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assassinate his character. This is a CEO who has dismissed her employees without any kind of severance package in a last-ditch effort to seize absolute control of a website we have all poured our hearts into for years. She has done all of this while presenting herself as a subject of workplace abuse, disgracing the #MeToo movement she dishonestly invokes. Worse, she only adopted this stance after it became clear that the staff would not support her hostile takeover.

Truthdig's demise ultimately reflects a crisis of liberalism the website has been documenting for years—one in which social justice is only worth pursuing so long as it doesn't threaten the material interests of society's true power brokers. Despite her claims of victimhood, Kaufman unequivocally falls into this category. But while she can retreat into her privilege amid an unprecedented public health crisis, the rest of us do not have that luxury. We have family to support, children to care for and sick parents to look after, now more than ever before. That is why we are calling on Truthdig to uphold its legal obligations and to ensure that a legacy built by dozens, if not hundreds, of contributors is not compromised by a single co-owner who has mistaken others' talent and integrity for her own.

Chris Hedges  
Kasia Anderson  
Jacob Sugarman  
Natasha Hakimi Zapata  
Eunice Wong  
Ilana Novick  
Mr. Fish  
Paul Street  
Lee Camp

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