

Get Your Remotes Ready— The Year Was “Made-for-TV”

By David Wilber

This year’s news events have provided further support for the notion that life is stranger than fiction. Network executives would be wise to keep the “Made-for-TV” rubber stamp poised; 1997 yields a treasure trove of programming material.

Among the headlines: O. J. Simpson found liable for murder; a Finn Dorset sheep cloned; Liggett indicts the tobacco industry; vacancy sign erected outside Lincoln Bedroom; Heaven’s Gate cultists rendezvous with Haley-Bopp comet; super-computer defeats chess grandmaster; Princess Diana dies in a high-speed auto crash; Marv Albert and Mike Tyson are involved in “biting” sagas; a British au pair girl is freed by the judge after the jury convicted her of second degree murder.

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In reviewing these oddities I was inclined to look for other apocalyptic signs—floods, a plague of locust, at the very least some confirmation that extra terrestrials are living among us. Yes, El Niño is coming and a slew of alien-genre box office successes give reason to take pause, but other signs the sky is falling were scant. Happily, I found encouraging evidence that even under such duress the public’s reaction was balanced, sensible and when appropriate, even dismissive. Below is a sampling of public reaction.

The O. J. Simpson Civil Trial

For all the drivel and excess—including the book tours, juror exposés, and a battle over O. J.’s Heisman trophy—the public’s response to the tragedy was measured. In a February Princeton Survey Research Associates/*Newsweek* poll, 64% of the public agreed with the guilty verdict in the civil case; only 22% disagreed. And a whopping 93% told interviewers from the Hart and Teeter Research Companies in late January that they thought the trial had been getting too much press attention.

The Lincoln Bedroom

In a September Gallup/CNN/*USA Today* poll, more Americans expressed concern over Democrats’ accepting large contributions from foreign nationals and entrepreneurs who sought privileged access to promote their agendas (42%), than over celebrity sleep-overs in the Lincoln bedroom (15%), or contributors’ being invited to coffee socials with the President (6%). Putting Republican grandstanding aside, the public recognized that questionable political fundraising isn’t the sole province of the Democratic party.

“Hello, Dolly”

Design your own child, nurture the development of headless humans for organ transplants, genetically-engineer high-yield livestock. With the successful cloning of a sheep named Dolly, would all this soon be possible? The public rejected any such future: Mere mortals shouldn’t play God or fool with Mother Nature. An ABC News survey in late February found 87% saying that the cloning of humans shouldn’t be allowed. Sixty-seven percent in a February Yankelovich survey thought cloning would create more problems than it solved. Similarly, Yankelovich found clear majorities believing that cloning animals (66%) or human beings (89%) is morally unacceptable.

Technophobes? That’s unlikely; the public evinces a responsible recognition that much can go wrong in genetic tinkering. People resist radical engineering of life’s natural course. Recent films, including Andrew Niccol’s *Gattaca*, dramatize the idea of awaiting catastrophes.

“Coffin Nails”

The \$370 billion tobacco settlement prompted one of the most noteworthy public reactions. The agreement met favor. This doesn’t mean the public sees tobacco executives as primarily responsible for smoking ills. In an April Opinion Dynamics/Fox survey, Americans by a large margin (67%) held smokers more accountable for their tobacco-related illnesses than the product manufacturers (19%). We attach a high premium to individuals’ choice and responsibility—whether they’re exercised well or badly. But public criticism of the industry remains strong. Nine-in-ten in a May Harris survey said that tobacco executives have known smoking causes cancer and is addictive. Furthermore, 80% believe that tobacco companies’ marketing campaigns are aimed at youth.

Nineteen-hundred and ninety-seven was a bizarre year indeed. “Made-for-TV” movies will probably capitalize further on these events. Meanwhile, a resilient public readies for the year ahead.



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