CHAPTER 2

Manufacturing Realities: Truth Is What You Can Get Away With

Abstract  This chapter explains how Donald Trump utilizes the wrestling concept of kayfabe to forge his own reality. Kayfabe involves pretending an event, action, or activity is absolutely real, no matter how contrived or fabricated it happens to be in actuality. This chapter explores how manufacturing spaces impact perception. The chapter looks at the origins of modern professional wrestling within the circus and theater. The specialized language of wrestling comes directly from the circus, which also helped develop its theatrical mannerisms. It also explores others who have manufactured realities to help create and controls ideas within spaces. It looks at Disney parks, Dan Rice, John R. Brinkley, and Father Charles Coughlin. All three men (Rice, Brinkley, and Coughlin) had political ambitions and used their fame to help achieve them.

Keywords  Manufactured reality · Kayfabe · Dan Rice · John R. Brinkley · Father Charles Coughlin

Donald Trump allows the average man to dream. He has shown that anyone is capable of winning the presidency. Scandal, shortcomings, personal failings do not have to derail a presidential dream. He inspires the people who did not work tirelessly toward a goal to hope they can still become powerful. Donald Trump sells the dream of aspirational power

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and wealth. He has done so throughout his entire career. It gives people who have no expectations of themselves the ability to feel good enough. Steaks, airlines, vodka, magazines, and private colleges all have elements of a kayfabe performance. Each enterprise was presented to the public as the gold standard of its field. Trump supported them all as pinnacles of achievement. However, all either ceased production, closed down, or were not successful enough to continue (Koeffler 2015). They were all fantasies of success marketed to the public as legitimate enterprises when their viability was primarily speculative.

It is easy to look at these attempts with derision. However, the truth of their impact is far more complex. The shortcomings and failures are not negative. For the persons who feel left behind, passed over, or fall short, Trump signals to them that all is not lost. They can still be prosperous, they can achieve dreams, and they can flaunt their success in the faces of all the ones who ran them down. Trump sells the illusion of aspiration. He offers the perception of success through the purchase of his product. Sometimes, the product is one often associated with wealth, such as wine or steaks. As president, Donald Trump offers himself as the product. Pithy t-shirts, buttons, and other collectibles are easily purchased to help bolster his campaign coffers. In return, the Donald Trump gives the audience entertainment as a candidate, and later, the president.

In a very real sense, Donald Trump is not all that different from the Disney Corporation. Disney is in the business of “manufacturing fantasy” (Wasko 2001, p. 5). Disney operates upon the assumption they are not just “recognized, but loved around the world” (Wasko 2001, p. 221). Trump employs similar language often equating his supporters as a silent majority with detractors comprising only a noisy minority of Americans. Both Trump and Disney tie themselves closely to what they refer to as American values. In the case of Disney, Wasko (2001) asserts many of these values “have either been mythologized or not necessarily embraced by everyone” (p. 224). The same criticism can also be leveled upon Donald Trump. “Make America Great Again,” his slogan for the 2016, evokes both a prospective promise for the future, but implies a halcyon past which needs to be recaptured.

Disney and Trump trade on manufactured realities. In other words, they each create spaces where they set and orchestrate the rules. Disney parks use suspension of disbelief as the standard. In these manufactured spaces, control of expectations is paramount. When people accept them as the truth, they surrender control of their own rational thought processes.
Koenig (2002) notes a person at the gate asked an attendant if it was raining inside the park since it was storming outside in the parking lots (p. 21). Fantasies are made real within Disney as long as you pay for the experience and accept the magic comes with a wink and a nod. People in their daily lives would likely not wear Goofy ears when going to a public municipal park for recreation. However, at Disney, people wear them proudly after purchasing them at a premium inside a park gift shop. They may be relegated to the back of a closet at home, but within the confines of the park, they are at the height of fashion and happily worn atop one’s head. The resetting of standards and norms within manufactured spaces is important and cannot be underemphasized. The expectations within the spaces shifts and recasts itself into the worldview of the purveyor. In Trump’s case, it exists as metaphorical head space where his values, ideas, and beliefs reign supreme. He constructs an insular world of his own making where his opinions exist as the only valid ones. For Disney, both metaphorical and physical spaces exist for their perspectives. Disney has the parks, cruise ships, film studios, toys and other ventures that create physical representations of their fantasy. Within their physical spaces, like the parks, they reset a person’s expectation for a reasonable wait or interaction. People will line up hours in advance for the opportunity to take a quick photo with a costumed actor portraying a film or television character. It is reasonable to accept that children will long to see their favorite character brought to life and interact with them. However, adults without children will also patiently wait in the same lines for these moments with live representational avatars of favorite programs. They surrender a modicum of their skepticism in exchange for an attempt to recapture the wonder of their childhoods. Persons will wait for two or three hours in a line for a ride that lasts under five minutes. They will willingly stand outside in the sun politely queuing with strangers to experience an attraction. Many do it simply for the ability to proclaim they have been on that particular ride. It is more about the acquisition of the experience to either separate themselves from the ones who have not, or join in the communal repartee of those who have done it. The sacrifice of hours in line is outweighed by the emotional satisfaction of the event. Individuals will often accept the line was long, but the trade-off was worth the time invested in the wait. Many people wait comparable times at the driver’s license bureau to get or renew their license. The ownership of a valid license allows people privileges they cannot exercise without one. Places
often require a valid state identification to be allowed to vote in an election. It also permits people to legally drive and acquire vehicle insurance. However, rarely do people downplay a long wait to the friends while carefully describing the actual experience in front of a clerk processing the renewal. Theme parks create atmospheres where attitudes and expectations are temporarily reset in favor of the ones subtly inculcated by the location. They attempt to cultivate an immersive environment where a person’s typical reactions and interactions are subjugated in favor of the park’s expectations. Disney will solemnly, yet cheerfully, apologize for long waits, but not change the time to accommodate temper tantrums or ill behaviors. They want their guests to experience their magic and feel special, but it is still a communal magic that touches everyone individually without doling out favoritism. Park goers can console themselves with the notion they are the chosen ones experiencing these events right now while others they know are not participating. It is that inclusion that makes the people special and the lines tolerable. In other words, the space has manufactured its own reality. Manufactured realities are spaces where we suspend the norms and rules of the outside world.

While different, supporters of Donald Trump share many similarities. His supporters join a fraternity of sorts that defines itself by the exclusion of others. They feel their inclusion grants them special status and privilege not shared by detractors. It also gives them a veneer of success for standing by this person as their president. It functions less about political choice and more about personal alignment. Trump encourages this perception by aggressively attacking any criticism. They bemoan any condemnation upon their allies, while simultaneously striking out in what they feel is justifiable in-kind treatment. On February 6, 2020, Donald Trump gave a long press conference where he lashed out about the impeachment process without accepting any culpability of his actions (Baker 2020). Specifically, he called into question the religiosity of Nancy Pelosi and Mitt Romney without any proof other than his own opinion. He heralded his “total acquittal” while minimizing the reality it was in fact simply the Senate refusing to remove him from office. Trump and his allies latched onto the acquittal term because it helps drive a positivity narrative for them with the justification of future action. In other words, Donald Trump, much like Disney, created a manufactured reality where the rules of engagement are set by whatever provides him the most advantage at the moment. For Trump, ideology is ultimately flexible and
secondary to power. The rub lies in the fact Trump will deny this duality on the surface while embracing it in the shadows.

The key to deciphering Donald Trump’s worldview for engagement with others stems from the world of professional wrestling. The language, posturing, and social interactions of the theatrical sport provide an astute lens to better understand his behaviors. The world of wrestling itself is a manufactured reality. With its roots in theater and the circus, the ring and its entryway strongly resemble a thrust theater with the action occurring in space similar to a theater in the round. Within wrestling, behaviors and actions must play, or sell, well to a crowd. Crowd enthusiasm gauges the continuation or elimination of an activity. The verity of truth lies within the forcefulness of your articulation. He can consistently position himself as the person fighting against an “elitist” system designed to subdue persons like him.

Donald Trump has played into very classic notions of American culture while tapping into its deep connections to populism. Orrin Klapp’s seminal piece on typologies in American society explores how certain ideals are embraced or rejected as cultural norms. As the fascination with heroes declined, the public embraced other classifications more willingly rather than rejecting them outright. Trump embodies many of the characteristics of a “flouter,” “rogue,” and a “troublemaker” which all fall within his villain category. Klapp claims Americans are generally ambivalent about the flouter which “seems to thumb his nose at the social order by scandalous behavior” (Klapp 1962, p. 53). The “rogue” is “a complex character who enjoys the distinction of being at the same time hero, villain, and fool – often given the names rascal, scalawag, scamp, and hell-raiser” (Klapp 1962, p. 54). On the other hand, “troublemakers” “might be a newcomer unwilling to accept procedure established by tradition of authority” (Klapp 1962, p. 54). Trump has made multiple comments toward his own party and the system working against him. He said “[T]he Establishment is trying to take it all away from us, folks. They’re trying so hard” (Howley 2016) at a rally in Wisconsin. He has repetitively referred to the media as the enemy of the people (Bierman 2017).

Donald Trump has embraced the mantle of the outsider, and while in Klapp’s world it may be a villain, he may be unwittingly touching on far deeper connections to theatrical traditions though implemented for the modern world. “In professional wrestling, more often than not, the bad guy wins. The rules are broken. Referees are powerless to prevent the
villain’s humiliation and degradation of the helpless victim” (Campbell 1996, p. 127). Donald Trump plays the role well as a rule-breaker challenging what he believes is an unjust system. Trump embraces the mantle of the outsider and

[W]restlers know very well how to play up to the capacity for indignation of the public by presenting the very limit of the concept of Justice, this outermost zone of confrontation where it is enough to infringe the rule a little more to open the gates of a world without restraints. For a wrestling fan, nothing is finer than the revengeful fury of a betrayed fighter who throws himself vehemently not on a successful opponent but on the smarting image of foul play. (Barthes 1982, pp. 25–26)

The language of dramatic wrestling, as well as many of its tactics root into the world of the American circus. “It is said that P.T. Barnum was the first American wrestling promoter” (Kerrick 1980, p. 144). Within the circus, the clown has been an integral part of the entire experience. While its origins may date back to Roman times, the clown or fool has been a theatrical technique that has been used with great effect for centuries. Shakespeare utilized clown “and his disrespect and total lack of inhibition was a large element of his appeal. … The clown actor, then as well as now, is in a unique position, simultaneously inside and outside the proceedings, and therefore able to make us feel like active participants in the experience of the drama” (Videbaek 1996, p. 191). Shakespeare often employed the clown to offer insights, truths, or information in a particular way. The individual did not have to be well-liked, and in fact, often had many flaws, but the truth of their words often was more poignant in the face of the character’s failings. Donald Trump has frequently cast himself in the role of the fool or clown within American life. In the classical sense, the fool wielded great power and authority. The modern usage of the word has turned it into a more derisive one, but Trump really occupies the space of the classical construct.

The clown derived from fool of the court. “Greatly respected as was the privilege of the fool to speak the truth on all occasions, whoever might wince under it…” (Doran 1858, p. 50). Nobility throughout Europe often employed fools as part of their royal courts. At Eltz Castle in Germany, the walls of the room where knights met have heads of jesters. They were placed there as symbols to indicate all could speak freely in this space without repercussion (“Burg Eltz,” n.d.). The fool, jester, or clown
was granted greater free speech than others. They told the uncomfortable truths of society. “Fools were free to speak before there was a liberty of the press, or even a press at all” (Doran 1858, pp. 51–52). While only once part of the heraldic courts, playwrights like Shakespeare and others used the clown on stage as a rhetorical device for confrontation of their protagonists. Clowns have often shared a special place in many societies as outsiders on the inside who could challenge norms within the safety of their sphere. It would stand to reason that modern circus would be a place many people would look for entertainment and socialization.

In the nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries, when the circus came to town in America, it was often the dominating topic of discussion for weeks. The event cut often across class lines and gave rural areas their first look at exotic animals, persons, and performances. In many communities, “Circus Day” was so popular, “shops closed their doors, schools canceled classes, and factories shut down” (Davis 2002, p. 2). This experience also helped reaffirm many notions of outsiders within society. At this time, the circus came to town with exhibitions composed of foreigners from places far away from America. Gawking had its place as well as the clown. The circus, with its sideshows, performances, and animals gave people windows into another world. Freak shows gave people comfort in their own normality. It also helped reinforce the otherness of distant cultures. Davis (2002) asserts

the circus helped consolidate a shared sense of white racial privilege among its diverse, white ethnic audiences; Euroamerican spectators came, in part, to laugh at what they ostensibly were not: preindustrial, slow, bumbling, or ‘savage.’ The circus played a double function because it codified European ethnicity as racial difference, while simultaneously promoting a uniform ‘white’ American racial identity. (p. 26)

These acts like “wild men of Borneo” help reinforce the importance of segregation and separation to many audiences who may have never seen persons from outside their own community. For the audiences of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concepts like eugenics were broadly accepted within American society. “By 1928, eugenics was a topic in 376 separate college courses, which enrolled approximately 20,000 students. A content analysis of high school science text books published between 1914 and 1948 indicates that a majority presented eugenics was a legitimate science” (“Eugenics Archive,” n.d.). Congenital imperfections
helped give audiences a sense of voyeurism with reinforcement of thankfulness for their own lot in life. Persons of color were often presented as savages with minimal clothing to play up their otherness as curiosities and not fellow humans. “Two common themes characterized the presentation of women from ‘savage’ societies: sexual promiscuity and participation of physical labor” (Davis 2002, p. 131). Acts like sword swallowing or snake charming often threaded lines between burlesque and wholesome entertainment to maximize profitability. These acts help engrain ideas of superiority into communities throughout the country. Foreigners, especially non-white ones, were displayed as persons needed to contain and keep separate. In many ways, they were mini-morality plays about the primacy of the Western European/American experience. It was not until after the Second World War that it became difficult for circuses to acquire racially diverse persons from other countries (Davis 2002, p. 226). These acts at their height of popularity were often on the sideshow near or blended with freak shows. These were often complemented by other acts like early professional wrestling. Modern professional wrestling was born from the circus, in particular, the circus sideshows. People came to see the extraordinary. Feats and contests of strength were often part of that entertainment. The performers put on a show for the paying public. The clowns often engaged in light satire and humor while the sideshows helped reinforce the spectator’s positive beliefs of their own personal lives. Professional wrestling started in this world, but quickly grew beyond it and evolved into its own creation. However, the roots of its origins resonate in the sport even through the modern incarnations. Language, audience engagement, and theatricality all trace their foundation to the circus. While clearly not Elizabethan theater, it still deploys many of these classical tactics to engage the audience in similar ways.

The language of wrestling is important because it helps explain how performance in the ring as well as on stage helps define the way insiders and outsiders are perceived. “Much of the language of wrestling is argot, terminology designed to conceal meaning from an outsider” (Kerrick 1980, p. 144). In other words, wrestlers use words in ways to help create their own exclusive space within the broader world. Argot is drawn specifically from carnie language that was directly “lifted from the circus or carnival” (Kerrick 1980, p. 144). Circus and wrestlers both typically live itinerant lifestyles moving from city to city on an almost daily basis. Distinctive language helps create a separation from those in their professions and others. Within this idea sits the essence of kayfabe.
They are giving a show for an audience who they are hoping to sell their performance and have them accept it as authentic. The truth is less important than “getting over” or “popping” the crowd by generating strong reactions. Cheering and booing are two sides of the same coin. The emotion from the audience is more important than its direction. The worst possible outcome would be no reaction from a crowd. Positive or negative outflowing of emotion means an audience cares enough to emote. If they have no response, it means the performer has failed at their job of entertainment. Within the language of wrestling, the good guys are babyfaces while the heels are bad guys (Kerrick 1980, p. 144). Kayfabe demands these performers maintain their character and do not indicate they are portraying a fiction. “A wrestler’s success will be evaluated not in whether he wins or loses but by how effectively he plays that role” (Campbell 1996, p. 128). The truth is in the reaction of the audience. Their enthusiasm for activity determines its continuation.

Donald Trump’s appeal rests within these theatrical tactics and performances. Shakespeare used the clown to often appeal to the groundlings. Modern professional wrestling has strong appeal with working-class Americans who also ties to populism. Professional wrestling allows things not commonly expressed by the media or politicians to be aired in a stylized environment. “If traditional melodrama centers upon the moral struggle between the powerful and the vulnerable, masculine melodrama confronts the painful paradox that working-class men are powerful by virtue of their gender and vulnerable by virtue of their economic status” (Jenkins 1997, p. 75). Wrestling gives the voiceless a voice. It functions as the modern agora where spectators also have the opportunity to join the chorus. Their social frustrations can be vented in a public space using stylized and symbolic heroes and villains as their focus. These spaces are important for societies to feel connected and have their voices expressed. Throughout American history, people have occasionally emerged who have captured the public’s imagination and considered themselves their voice. They have been part of the circus or media and aspired to either attain or put surrogates into power. The ways they used the power of the public to draw together supporters and devotees to help achieve their goals. Dan Rice, John R. Brinkley, and Father Charles Coughlin are three such persons who captured the public’s imagination and each attempted to transition that into political power.
One of the early “celebrity” outsiders to run for president was Dan Rice. He was a circus performer who became one of the most famous Americans in the country during the mid-nineteenth century. Rice was a literal clown in the circus. Circus at this time was a more interactive experience with the audience and performers engaging with each other in often verbal back and forth quips (Carlyon 2001, p. 5). Persons on the stage would dialogue with the audience. Circus performers, such as Rice, frequently discussed political issues and would have monologues more in line with Will Rogers than the modern circus clowns who primarily use pantomime. In many ways, modern professional wrestling’s interaction with the audience has very strong commonalities with Dan Rice’s act. Wrestlers often have an introduction by their master of ceremonies followed by a dramatic entrance into the ring. Many physical contests do not immediately begin when the combatants enter the ring. They routinely provide exposition and dialogue aimed at riling up the crowd, moving the dramatic narrative along, or commentary about their opponent. During many current wrestling performances, the bout is rarely about a show of strength and force. It is a physical representation of the antagonisms between the two wrestling characters or as a proxy on behalf of allies.

If the circus routinely had clowns providing interactive discourse with the crowds about events and politics, what changed to create the muted audience with silent clowns? The shift of this interaction to the more spectator-based audience was actually driven by political events. With the Spring of Nations (also known as the Revolutions of 1848) in 1848, “rowdy interaction in performance caused anxiety” with “passive and quiet spectators” considered the best “solution to his newly conceived ‘problem’ of participation” (Carlyon 2001, p. 83). Circus owners, as well as many community leaders, began to fear the open discourse of the public. In short, they were worried about crowds being inflamed and turning into angry throngs. These concerns have valid justifications from various points of view. “Worry about mob rule inevitably extended to audiences. In theater and circuses, participation was customary, with conversation common and rowdy enthusiasm running across classes. Audiences were not simply expressing an opinion, they were exercising the duty of ‘THE PEOPLE’ in a republic” (Carlyon 2001, p. 262). There existed fears that an excess of democracy could easily turn into
a riotous situation that could spin out of control. These concerns were not unfounded as noted by the Hartford Fire of 1944. Circus tents were often coated in paraffin wax soaked in gasoline (O’Nan 2001). When the fire broke out, it spread quickly throughout the enclosed space. The tent collapsed upon hundreds of spectators, trapping them under the burning canvas (Skidgell 2014, p. 61). This event resulted in over 160 deaths and at least 600 injuries (“The Hartford,” n.d.). The fears of an unruly audience were salient with potentially disastrous consequences.

Dan Rice’s popularity rivaled the most famous persons of the day with a Mobile newspaper once commenting “it was ‘no wonder that the audience are involuntarily carried along at his will, and that they become apparently unconscious puppets in his hands’” (as cited in Carlyon 2001, p. 75). Dan Rice was an effective orator and used his skills to enthral an audience. His draw was so strong, presidential candidates like Zachary Taylor were tremendously helped by his vocal support. Rice campaigned for Zachary Taylor using a bandwagon at the circus. His popularity would encourage local politicians to often climb on it thus spawning the colloquial phrases involving jumping on bandwagons and likely one of the early instances of riding coattails. The tools of Rice’s trade often involved hyperbole, mockery, and physical threats to the competition if they encroached upon his territory.

By the Civil War, Rice began creating a fictional history for himself as a way to create a mythos larger than life. For example, without proof, he adopted the title of Colonel claiming Zachary Taylor once gave it to him for his campaign support (Carlyon 2001, p. 352). Though purely speculative, Taylor’s home state of Kentucky does have the ability to bestow the ceremonial title of “Colonel” to renowned persons. Dan Rice was a Democrat who regularly shifted his political views to best appeal to his audiences. In the mid-nineteenth century, these changes were accomplished by playing up or down slavery support while simultaneously defending patriotic values. When he ran for president in 1867, Rice made “politics his opponent” (Carlyon 2001, p. 348) pulling support from the working classes while simultaneously attempting to distance himself from his low brow language and humor. He frequently attacked any criticism directed toward him. He referred to the editors of a Michigan paper as “malicious liars” when they published unflattering stories (Carlyon 2001, p. 350). These comments are remarkably similar to Donald Trump a century and a half later. During his campaign, Trump referred to his own “party’s system for selecting its presidential nominee is a ‘scam’
and a ‘disgrace.’” (Cusack 2016). Much of Trump’s campaign and presidency has been defined by repetitive attacks upon the media when he believes coverage is inaccurate or unfair. He regularly brands news he dislikes as fake and has often described the press as the people’s enemy (Roig-Franzia and Ellison 2020).

While Rice’s campaign ultimately went nowhere, it did give him material for lectures delivered in various formats for the remainder of his professional career. Rice claimed many relationships when they were advantageous to him, notably a close friendship with Abraham Lincoln (Carlyon 2001, pp. 409–410) and did not deny being the inspiration for Uncle Sam. Scant verifiable evidence is lacking in both cases, though Rice at his height did dress and have facial hair similar to the iconic caricature figure. However, it is unclear which one emulated the other or if it was merely coincidental. Dan Rice was a popular American figure during the nineteenth century. He gained fame through an entertainment medium that had strong appeal toward the average citizen. His circus act used tools still in use today in the circus and professional wrestling. He attempted to use his popularity to transition himself into a political figure, but was ultimately hampered by the internal party forces of the era. Rice has many commonalities with Donald Trump. Both men created personas for themselves through the media of their day. They each had troubled personal lives (divorces notably), but created public images that often transcended the mundane. Rice and Trump craft images of success with the stories more important than the realities.

**JOHN R. BRINKLEY**

John R. Brinkley was well known in the early to mid-twentieth century for a variety of things. He was a doctor and radio personality who almost won a governorship. While many people at the time would consider him a revolutionary medical pioneer, others would place him firmly in the “quack” camp. He used the tools of his trade to brand himself as the iconic medical gold standard for rural and middle-class Americans. Brinkley understood that success was rarely about skill. It was marketing and public opinion. He transformed himself from a person subsisting on the itinerant city to city jobs into one of the most renown figures of his day.

How did he do this? In short, he accomplished it via goat testicles. He created and proselytized a process that addressed erectile dysfunction back
when it was only discussed euphemistically among people. He appealed to the vanity of aging men whose reproductive systems were decidedly in nap mode. He transplanted the testicles of a goat into an adult man to help increase his virility. These activities were well-documented and publicized. His process was considered revolutionary and people flocked to this doctor who had answers for their problems. He even inserted goat glands into several Hollywood celebrities (Lee 2002, p. 46). Brinkley guarded his process as proprietary, likely in part to circumvent judgment from the broader medical community. Though his methods were never fully documented, it appears he implanted slivers of goat testicle into patients with the idea it would be absorbed by the body before it putrefied.

John Brinkley’s fame began to rise in the late 1910s. He had spent a career marketing himself with varying degrees of success. By the early 1920s, Brinkley’s career was on the upswing. The goat testicle transplantations began to take off and capture the public consciousness. He only had one major complication: the lack of a reputable medical license. When he was younger, he was unable to pay his tuition and instead opted to shortcut a degree by manipulating the system and paying certain fees that would facilitate agreements (Lee 2002, pp. 21–22). A newspaper exposé of this system occurred in 1923 accusing schools of selling degrees and after being issued licenses these new doctors would exploit “reciprocity licensing” (Lee 2002, p. 49) and move to other states. At the time, Brinkley was operating under a license issued in Connecticut. The state “was so embarrassed by the exposure and bad publicity that the state rescinded all licenses issued to eclectic doctors, including Brinkley’s” (Lee 2002, p. 49). Brinkley lost several licenses from both foreign and domestic governmental entities who had granted in-kind from the Connecticut one.

While these setbacks would often be the death knell on many careers, Brinkley’s turned to the media as a way to reinvent himself and add a veneer of distinction that appealed to many people who rarely saw doctors because of proximity or income. He created his own radio station in 1923 that blended entertainment with testimonials and information about increasing virility through transplantation. He eschewed the elite medical boards in favor of the common man who enjoyed the entertainment and light education. His station, KFKB, was located in Kansas and “the fourth commercial station in the country” (Lee 2002, p. 62) and quickly became “first in the nation in terms of listener interest” (Lee 2002, p. 62). Brinkley tailored his message to appeal to farming families who liked the
news, music, religious fundamentalism, and medical advice. In 1927, the station began operating on 5000 watts of power allowing it to “be heard anywhere in North America” (Lee 2002, p. 70). Brinkley tapped into a large working-class market of Americans who wanted medical advice in a friendly, non-threatening way. His daily programming schedule entertained and offered close to medical proverbs. They did not explicitly give medical protocols, but encouraged the listeners to turn to Brinkley for their ailments. Brinkley’s words carried weight with his listeners. They saw him as a successful physician and trusted his commentary and advice. His business rapidly expanded leading to the creation of the very profitable Brinkley Pharmaceutical Association (Lee 2002, p. 70) which provided him a portion of the sales from the filled prescriptions. He would read letters on the air and give them suggested numbers of prescriptions from his association in order to help control the distribution and profit margin. At his height, Brinkley had millions of listeners and grew extremely wealthy from the business in Milford, Kansas. He did not see his radio viewers though he would regularly prescribe his patented medications, which were far more expensive than other options. Over time, complaints grew about his business practices. Brinkley vigorously defended his practices and organization with lawsuits, advertisements, and demeaning language on his radio station. “His supporters worshiped him and his opponents hated him” (Lee 2002, p. 88). During his radio broadcasts, he referred to the American Medical Association (AMA) “as the ‘Amateur Meatcutters Association’ and Morris Fishbein [of the AMA] as ‘Little Old Fishy’” (Lee 2002, p. 89).

The more the AMA tried to regulate or address the concerns of Brinkley’s questionable medical practices, the more aggressive the doctor became toward defending his lucrative and growing financial empire. As regulatory agencies (such as the Kansas Medical Board and Federal Radio Commission) grew concerned about the Brinkley medical business, he attacked the political system as corrupt and stacked against him (Lee 2002, pp. 100–102). When eventually forced to shut down his radio station, he quickly purchased a transmitter just inside the Mexican border that would broadcast at 50,000 watts (Lee 2002, p. 103). By 1936, he was broadcasting at 1,000,000 watts overwhelming other signals as far as New Orleans, Philadelphia, and New York (Lee 2002, p. 173). While we may consider Dr. Brinkley’s practice to be farcical nowadays, it was serious business to both Brinkley and his followers. It also sounds reminiscent of the modern situation with Donald Trump. He gained national awareness
through the media and uses the media to attack critics. Trump regularly verbally aggresses and insults challengers (Croucher 2019; Edelman 2019; Lee and Quealy 2019; Relman 2019). Concerns about Brinkley’s medical practices and radio medicine eventually lead to Kansas taking action against him in a way to curtail his activities. The ultimate loss of his license to practice in Kansas was a personal and professional attack upon his business and reputation. In order to salvage them, he decided to run for governor of the state. It would be the ultimate revenge for those who wronged him since he would gain control over the regulatory boards that attempted to strip him of his livelihood. John R. Brinkley and Donald Trump share many commonalities. Each man found audiences who felt they had not been given a voice by people in charge. Both turned to politics when they felt slighted by people, they wanted respect from as professionals in their fields. Brinkley wanted to be recognized as a medical professional and not a fraud. It is speculated Donald Trump began to seriously consider a presidential bid after being insulted at the 2011 White House Correspondents Dinner. Trump wanted to be considered an influential developer and revered television personality. The lack of adulation from the media likely helped push Trump into a presidential bid to raise his profile. Each man also traded on advice and entertainment.

They both felt maligned by the more traditional establishments and gained tremendous popularity through media exposure. However, at the same time, neither saw their personal reputation increase within their original field of enterprise. Dr. Brinkley felt the traditional medical establishment belittled his educational path and discounted it as a way to maintain their elitist system in power. Donald Trump has frequently expressed beliefs that the traditional political party leadership dismissed and discounted him. He has also made references to never feeling accepted by the social elite of New York society (Welch 2019). Brinkley decided to take on the electoral establishment of Kansas in 1930 and run for governor as a write-in candidate. He espoused several populist beliefs that he referred to as “Brinkleyism.” Many of his radio fans were fervently supportive of him for who he was more than what he stood for as a candidate. While he did not initially believe he could win, rapid support of his followers invigorated a platform for him to vent his spleen over the newspapers, political actors, and institutions he felt maligned him (Lee 2002, p. 121). He announced his candidacy within five days of the Kansas Medical Board revoking his license (Lee 2002, p. 121) with a platform “designed to appeal to farmers, laborers, the poor and others disaffected.”
(Lee 2002, pp. 121–122) and disgusted by the current political climate in Kansas. He complained that “the statehouse in Topeka was filled with corruption and inefficiency... [and] exhorted all good citizens to ‘Clean up, Clean out, and Keep Kansas Clean’” (Lee 2002, p. 122). Echoes of these platforms resonated decades later with Donald Trump’s assertions to “drain the swamp” in Washington, DC. In many ways, Brinkley cared less about true government reform and more about allowing his business practices to operate without constraint. Brinkley blended religion and populism into a platform with enormous appeal.

The Kansas government ruled that the only write-in ballots that would be counted for Brinkley were ones where his name “J.R. Brinkley” was spelled in exactly that fashion. Ballots with misspellings, different versions of his name, or just doctor would be discounted in the official tallies. He ultimately lost, but questions abounded about the volumes of discarded votes. His supporters wanted recounts, but “Brinkley could make more in a month as a physician than he could in two years in the governor’s office and probably did not really care to occupy the office” (Lee 2002, p. 129). The election was more about grinding political axes, increasing popularity, and bolstering supporters than actual good government. These issues sound strikingly familiar when compared to Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential run. There was suspicion he was angry at politicians for discounting his viability and wanted to use a run for office as a way to secure a better contract for The Apprentice television show (Kaczynski 2017; Moniuszko 2018). Both Brinkley and Trump utilize media to provide themselves a legitimacy they would not otherwise attain through traditional means. Each maintained lavish lifestyles to inculcate an image of success to their target audiences. Brinkley owned yachts, private planes, and mansions while appealing to the working class on his radio programs to use his services and prescriptions. Trump encourages the same perception with ostentatious wealth. Since the 1980s, Donald Trump has developed a persona of aspirational wealth through media appearances and real estate development.

The courts were ultimately the harbinger of Brinkley’s downfall. He would frequently sue people who he felt were damaging his reputation. In 1938, Brinkley sued Morris Fishbein of the AMA for libel in an article published in Hygeia (Lee 2002, p. 211). Intense examination under oath forced Brinkley to admit his medical surgeries did not do what he claimed and his advertisements were not truthful (Lee 2002, p. 217). The verdict went against Dr. Brinkley and the court publicly declared him a charlatan.
and a quack (Lee 2002, p. 218). Lawsuits from individuals and others for back taxes left Brinkley in desperate conditions. His domestic radio business was sold while the Mexican government confiscated the one inside their borders (Lee 2002, p. 220). He attempted to run for a Texas seat in United States Senate in 1940. The campaign quickly fell apart, but one newspaper warned his attempt “would again ‘be irresistible to the moron mind and Texas has plenty of such’” (Lee 2002, p. 223).

The life of John R. Brinkley holds many insights into Donald Trump, his followers, and their joint worldview. Brinkley relied upon his faith that the common man would seek out help, but not be especially information-seeking. He was given their trust because he echoed their concerns and spoke of alleviating fears. At his height, Brinkley drove and lived in ornate and obscenely garish vehicles and homes. He always presented an image of success no matter his own personal financial status. Audiences continued to tune into his shows because he brought entertainment and advice into their homes. It forged a personal connection that translated into loyalty. Many people believed in him even in the face of direct evidence of fraudulent activity. They wanted to believe because he at least offered them something compared to many politicians of the day. Politicians promised policy, but Brinkley offered medical advice, music, and religious content. He urged them to his clinic where he promised virility and health. Citizens could hear and see the tangible results of this promise. The content was given to them on a daily basis replete with platitudes and friendly voices. Average citizens do not see the daily progress of politicians at work. They hear promises, but rarely see concrete results. Policy change happens slowly with its results tracked by decades, not days. Citizens often feel the government does nothing because it is often difficult to see the slow progress unless one pays careful attention. For example, it is all but impossible to watch paint on a wall dry. We see it wet and we will observe it in stages of drying and then dry, but we rarely notice when it is 5% or 8% complete. We know the process, but many are frustrated when it does not happen as quickly as hoped because of increased humidity or other factors that interfere with typical results.

Donald Trump also trades on the imagery of wealth and entertainment. Wrestling gives him a verbal style that allows him to say things most people wish. As the boss on The Apprentice he could say what he wants with no consequences. As president, he presents people the same image of decisive leadership. His policies like building a wall, restricting immigration, or even detaining people at a border are all issues that can present
tangible evidence to show action upon what he claims. While some people are horrified, others see it as a confirmation of their choice for a “doer.” Many people feel frustrated at the slow process of bureaucracy and find his assertions comforting because they indicate action, even if it functions only as a rhetorical façade of superficiality.

Father Charles Coughlin

Charles Coughlin was a Catholic priest who rose to national prominence during the 1920s and 1930s. In many ways, he primed media for talk radio and television evangelical programming. At his height, he was drawing over 40 million listeners a week (Marcus 1973) making his broadcast the most popular in the nation. He is important for using mass media to inspire the population into action. Coughlin was, in a very real sense, going directly public (Ouyang and Waterman 2020) as early as 1930. He gave weekly sermons on the radio that regularly emphasized political and social commentary. He utilized tactics such as name-calling to denigrate others, specifically linking terms like “atheistic,” ‘international,’ and ‘Communist’ with ‘Jew’” (Lee and Lee 1939, p. 31). Coughlin used his radio pulpit to assert Jews were involved in a conspiracy within the United States and abroad to establish communistic governments (General Jewish Council 1939). While initially supportive of the New Deal (Tull 1965, p. 239), he grew unhappy with it as time progressed. His unhappiness manifested itself into a conspiracy theory alleging wealthy Jewish bankers were at the root of the worldwide depression (Tull 1965, p. 40). He has no substantiating proof other than his own thoughts and beliefs. These “hunch” tactics have also been deployed by Donald Trump over the years to push ideas that frequently lack evidence (Zeballos-Roig et al. 2019; Sargent 2020; “Conspiracy Theories,” n.d.). During early 2020, President Trump even referred to the coronavirus as the “new hoax” by the Democratic Party (Franck 2020) as another attempt to undermine his administration.

Father Coughlin began endorsing political candidates in 1935 to help “influence the selection of congressional candidates” (Tull 1965, p. 117). He was hostile and truculent toward the New Deal which led to his involvement in the creation of the Union Party. The party ran North Dakota Senator William Lemke as their candidate in the presidential elections of 1936. Coughlin was a key player in the party platform, goals, and campaigning. Coughlin dominated the political arena more
than the presidential or vice-presidential candidates. At one political rally, he referred to Roosevelt as a liar and the resulting uproar caused the Vatican to order him to publicly apologize (Tull 1965, pp. 136–137). At the nominating convention, Coughlin’s control “could be used as an outstanding exhibit in any college course dealing with mob psychology. Coughlin was their messiah, and these people came prepared to obey humbly his every wish” (Tull 1965, p. 140).

President Roosevelt never rose to the bait of responding to Coughlin given the “risk of alienating large numbers of Catholic voters” (Tull 1965, p. 162). The eventual returns on election night were a disaster for the Union Party. They counted their supporters at five million, yet received “less than one million votes and fail[ed] to win the electoral vote of a single state” (Tull 1965, p. 163). Poor party organization, heavy negative campaigning, and running a Republican candidate on a third-party platform all likely contributed to this dismal showing.

By 1938, Father Coughlin began to assert “American democracy as too decayed to operate effectively” (Tull 1965, p. 243) and advocated a corporate state where parties would be abolished and the president selected out of the House of Representatives (Hansen 1939, p. 10). At one point, he pronounced “democracy was doomed” and embraced the “road to fascism” (Hansen 1939, p. 11). In addition, he began to espouse “militant nationalistic isolationism” (Tull 1965, p. 244). These beliefs were likely driven by anger and frustration over his inability to transition his large popular culture following to true political power of swaying national elections. He advocates overthrowing a system that does not hold him in high esteem and honor. President Trump has dipped his toes into the waters of systemic overhaul by joking about refusing to leave office (Cole 2019). By February 2020, he repeated the claim over 25 times leading some to question whether it is really humorous or a trial balloon to gauge public interest (Hasen 2020).

Father Coughlin continued his attacks upon Roosevelt, Jewish people, and communists while increasingly casting Nazism and Italian fascism in positive lights. By March 1942, Coughlin used his print publication to directly accuse “the Jews of starting the Second World War” (Tull 1965, p. 233). By this time, the language violated sedition laws involving the mail causing postal authorities to pursue action. This statement finally encouraged the Archbishop of Detroit, Edward Mooney, to neutralize Coughlin. “Mooney ordered Coughlin to stop his political activities or be defrocked” (Battistella 2014, p. 49). When given the choice between his
faith and his political activities, he withdrew from public life. He remained the priest at his parish until retirement, but was never again allowed to engage the broad national public on a regular basis.

Both Trump and Coughlin use certain populations to simultaneously uplift while disparaging others. Coughlin would target Roosevelt, Jews, and communists often generalizing them together without clear distinction. Donald Trump typically prefers to lump former President Obama, Democrats, and specific nationalities as targets for generalized vitriol. The two men both give large raucous political rallies where they promote their ideas and agendas with rapt populations reveling in the persuasive performances. Negative campaigning functions as the stock and trade for each one where they lament decisions of others as egregious violations of the moral and social orders. However, for Father Coughlin, he was ultimately accountable to the Catholic Church. When forced to choose between it and public notoriety, he selected the former.

**Conclusion**

The goal of this chapter involves highlighting how many craft and recrafts themselves, their images, and their attitudes of society to conform to goals, ideals, agendas, and dreams. Manufactured realities comprise the construction of imagery, expectation, and experience which makes illusion feel authentic. Disney, Rice, Brinkley, and Coughlin all moved the world and their supporters in the direction of their personal beliefs, opinions, or dreams. They also wield a strong measure of control over others. The Disney parks provide a narrative of American history that romanticizes its vision of our collective history while minimizing its negative aspects and conflicts. “The control motif is power, not least because it is relatively easy to cloak with euphemisms and neutral terms, of science, of progress, and of overcoming wilderness, and by eulogizing the intuition or courage of those who manage to (or seek to) overcome adverse conditions” (Bryman 1995, p. 107).

Words within these places matter. Within the world of Disney, employees are cast members, not employees. Uniforms are costumes and no one ever admits to playing a character onstage, or rather the public areas. Cast members who play characters usually refer to themselves as a friend of that character (Niles 2015) because anything else would break the magical construct of the fantasy. Brinkley, Coughlin, and Trump all also use language to craft imagery. They use language to belittle targets...
because it helps create a lasting impression. Disney parks use language for suspension of disbelief. Political actors use it the same way, but for other goals. During the March 20, 2020 press briefing, President Trump joking referred to the State Department as the “Deep” State Department (Nash 2020). These comments help substantiate perceptions of secret shadow governments while undermining the professionalism of the bureaucrats who spend careers specializing in areas of expertise.

Donald Trump seeks to create a manufactured reality akin to an enclosed biosphere where the opinions of himself and his allies are the only valid and acceptable ones. The truth stems from the belief in their assertions, not concrete facts. Critics, detractors, and threats are vilified primarily because they challenge their perspectives. Donald Trump has been especially voracious with the term “fake news.” He has used it on average once a day since inauguration as “a catch-all criticism for any news that Trump doesn’t like” (Stelter 2018). Historically, the term refers to inaccurate or blatantly false information. Donald Trump has shifted and confused its meaning to also encompass his personal disapproval of news. It is an overt attempt to rebrand it within his own manufactured reality while undermining trust for critics. It also simultaneously encourages supporters to only accept information and sources he personally endorses or approves. The impact of this situation has been enormous upon the landscape of American politics. According to Knight Foundation poll in 2018, “[F]our in 10 Republicans consider accurate news stories that cast a politician or political group in a negative light to always be ‘fake news’” (p. 3). This research suggests Donald Trump has fundamentally altered the perception of words within the English language. He has constructed his own lens that filtered all information into his worldview. Donald Trump interacts with the American public more regularly than any previous president. This constant presence helps forge a sense of intimacy between himself and his constituency. Though Intintoli (1984) was analyzing the emotional impact of soap operas, parallels exist with the Trump administration. “Viewers come to feel they know the characters well- characters are continually there, and their most intimate feelings, desires, and behaviors are accessible … The personalistic, intimate focus on highly emotional themes can create an experience of considerable emotional depth and intensity” (Intintoli 1984, p. 55). He also suggests that their “investment of time and energy can embody a form of moral commitment as they vicariously participate” (Intintoli 1984, p. 55). Though he was referring to the symbolic universe of the
soap opera, the emotional commitment of supporters and fans follow a similar path. Trump’s constant presence with his unfiltered commentary gives people a connection that likely feels more tangible than other politicians who focus on abstractions with little to no impromptu personal commentary. Supporters feel like they have a personal connection to him and he milks it for adulation and veneration.

His television viewing habits have turned certain news sources into a curated space for direct information access to the administration. Donald Trump uses programs like *Fox & Friends* the same way many administrations use bureaucratic policy advisors (Flood 2017; Gertz 2017; Marantz 2018; Moritz-Rabson 2018). This program, as well as others on their network, gives the president a measure of confirmation bias about his thoughts (Rupar 2019). Appearances on these programs provide direct access to the administration. Lobbyists buy airtime to promote their positions (Shields and Dlouhy 2019). In other words, Fox has access to the president. If you get your opinion on Fox, you have a high likelihood of being on the president’s radar. News sources report that around 60% of the president’s day is spent in unstructured executive time (McCammond and Swan 2019). Much of this time is devoted to television watching, newspapers, and then calling allies to discuss what he watched or read on television or in the print media (Smith 2019). It creates its own echo chamber where reality bends to conform to pleasing the president and catching his attention. It is the very essence of manufactured reality as well as kayfabe. Opinions are branded as facts and anyone is attacked who challenges this perspective (Quigley 2017; Jackson 2019; Pasley 2019; Herbert 2020; Tofel 2020). The president’s perspective is the only valid one and all others must be extinguished. This view aligns with the concept of kayfabe well since it presents the theatrical world of wrestling as reality and aggressively rebuts any suggestions otherwise.

These perceptions matter because they fundamentally impact the way the president filters information. During coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak of 2020, President Trump did not take it seriously for a significant amount of time (Leonhardt 2020) and at one point even said it will just go away (The White House 2020). It took several members of his inner staff to sit him down in a firm discussion to even accept the significance of the virus threat (Pettypiece 2020). More important, the President of the United States only began to shift rhetoric and tone after direct intervention by Fox news personality, Tucker Carlson (Sullivan 2020). Carlson spoke directly to the president to help him understand the
gravity and urgency of a governmental plan and response. It is noteworthy that a television personality had to intercede on behalf of the American population for a president to trust the information of the bureaucratic experts. These facts speak toward the power and sway the popular media, especially from Fox, holds over the policy decisions of the Trump administration. It gives them tremendous power to curate stories to cultivate opinions both from the people and their leaders.

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