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Book Review: It's Not News, It's Fark

Cover Page Footnote

It's not news, it's Fark: how mass media tries to pass off crap as news. Drew Curtis New York: Gotham Books, 2007. ISBN 978-1-592-40366-0 278 pp.

It's Not News, It's Fark: How Mass Media Tries to Pass Off Crap as News

Drew Curtis

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Book Review: *It's Not News, It's Fark*

Drew Curtis' book *It's Not News, It's Fark: How Mass Media Tries to Pass Off Crap as News* originally started out as a website where people could submit news articles that fit into the sub-categories of Fark, which are outlined as chapters "Media Fearmongering," "Unpaid Placement Masquerading as Actual Article," "Headline Contradicted by Actual Article," "Equal Time for Nutjobs," "The Out-of Context Celebrity Comment," "Seasonal Articles," "Media Fatigue," and "Lesser Space Fillers." Because of the popularity of the website, he compiled some of the article titles from the webpage and then turned it into a book with a brief description of the articles an explanation about why they are Fark.

The first chapter starts out by explaining that "Fark is what fills space when mass media runs out of news... [it] is supposed to look like news... but it's not news" (Curtis 2007, 1). Curtis then goes on to explain that Fark happens because we live in relatively uninteresting times and we have 24 hour news channels. Because of those two factors there is not enough news worthy information to fill all of the available time.

After defining Fark, Curtis gives a brief history of Fark.com and he also explains where the word Fark came from. Fark.com, which he stresses is a not a blog (Curtis 2007, 2), was started when Curtis sent his friend Phil "weird news stor[ies] from America" (Curtis 2007, 3). A few years later, Phil and some of Curtis' other friends got email accounts so he started emailing them funny articles. After a while Curtis' decided that his friends were going to get annoyed with receiving multiple emails a day so he started putting them up on Fark.com instead.

The last part of chapter one gives a brief description and an example of the different kinds of Fark. The first one is fear mongering. This often happens when the media extrapolates on potential disasters. Usually fear mongering articles involve a lot of "ifs" in them (Curtis 2007, 9-10). The second kind of Fark is "Unpaid Placement Masquerading as Actual Article" (Curtis 2007, 10), which happens when a journalist uses press releases to write articles, especially if the press release is a commercial for an organization or individual (Curtis 2007, 11). The third kind of Fark that Curtis mentions is when the article contradicts the headline. The fourth kind of fark is "Equal Time for Nutjobs" (Curtis 2007, 12).

Curtis mentions how this one happens because journalists try “to give equal time to both sides of a story... [even when] there flat out isn’t another side” (Curtis 2007, 12). The fifth kind of Fark is celebrity comments that are taken out-of-context. The sixth kind of Fark is the seasonal article. Part of the reason that these types of articles are Fark is that some of them are simply press releases, which have been strategically updated to look different from the press release that was sent out last year or holiday (Curtis 2007, 13). The other reason seasonal articles tend to be Fark is because people in the Mass Media do not like to work during the holidays. To avoid working they save articles from previous years that they can run again (Curtis 2007, 13). The seventh kind of Fark that Curtis mentions is “Media Fatigue” (Curtis 2007, 14). This form of Fark happens because journalists are expected to constantly come up with new information about the topics they are working on, eventually there are no more new angles and the media moves on (Curtis 2007, 16). The final form of Fark that Curtis mentions is “Lesser Media Space Fillers” (Curtis 2007, 17). These are similar to seasonal articles because they constantly reappear; however they are not tied to the calendar year. The examples Curtis gives of lesser media space fillers are “missing white chicks, plane crashes, and amputations of random body parts” (Curtis 2007, 17).

The next eight chapters elaborate on the different kinds of Fark. In the fear mongering chapter the first example Curtis uses is what happened with Katrina. The reason he starts with this example is because it illustrates “the problem of making fun of Media Fearmongering: If the disaster actually happens, you are an idiot” (Curtis 2007, 20). The rest of the chapter “pokes fun at such overhyped media garbage” and just in case Curtis also mentions that “on the off chance that any of it does happen, just remember that you didn’t see it coming either” (Curtis 2007, 20). Some of the other articles that Curtis discusses are “There’s a Seismic Fault Line in the Midwest. Everybody Panic” (Curtis 2007, 21), “Oh My God, There’s Bacteria on Everything” (Curtis 2007, 26), and “Kentucky officials run terrorism drill at goat show. ‘We try to focus on what really matters to Kentucky,’ says Homeland Security Department” (Curtis 2007, 35). For each of the articles Curtis talks about why it is fear mongering by highlighting why the information in the article is not horrifying. After each article, Curtis includes the comments his internet followers posted on the website, most of which are highly funny to read. Finally, at the end of the chapter Curtis talks about whether or not fear mongering is necessary. He also mentions how even though fear mongering scares people, the effect of it wears off very quickly because “we don’t care... [and] we soon forget” (Curtis 2007, 56). One final distinction that Curtis makes about fear mongering is that it is always about something that is unlikely to happen (Curtis 2007, 57). The rest of the chapters about the different kinds of Fark follow the same format: introduction to the type, examples with

follower's comments, and a conclusion that states why that type of Fark happens, discusses whether or not it is necessary, and cautions about using and believing this kind of Fark.

In the epilogue Curtis talks about what he thinks the mass media should be doing instead of producing Fark. He also defends the mass media by pointing out that the dramatization of news is necessary because "no one wants to read an article entitled 'Things are not all that bad'" (Curtis 2007, 253). Over all, Curtis thinks that nothing can be done; however one suggestion that he makes to the media is to make everything more local, and to use local talent to attract audiences (Curtis 2007, 256). He points out that there is no real cure to Fark because people do not want real news (Curtis 2007, 253). Curtis finishes off the book with the weirdest article he remembers seeing on Fark.com, and like in the other chapters he includes the viewers' comments.

While the book is quite entertaining to read, only the first chapter and the discussions at the end of the chapters are relevant to a university student. This is because Curtis gives a good explanation of the different kinds of Fark in the first chapter and therefore it is not necessary to read the first parts of the chapters on Fark because most of the explanations of Fark have already happened. The ends of the chapters on Fark are relevant to university students because they go into further detail about why the different kinds of Fark happen, and they also discuss why the different types of Fark are necessary or important sometimes. For those reasons I highly recommend the first chapter and the chapter discussions to all students, staff and faculty interested in gaining a deeper insight into news content.

The first chapter to raises awareness about the types of things that mass media does. It is important for people to know that a lot of the news they read is Fark. Reading the first chapter illustrates the importance of reading more than just the articles headline because, as Curtis points, out sometimes the headline does not match up with the article. For example, I recently read an article called "Economy treading water: Statistics Canada Report Expected to Show Output Fell in July," in the Hamilton Spectator and the entire article was about how the economy is not all that bad. Another important piece of information that people can get from reading the first chapter is that not all of the articles about impending doom are necessarily true. Although, Curtis does point out that disasters do sometimes happen after the media have predicted them, it does not happen every time, nor does it happen enough for people to be terrified all the time.

The chapter discussions give the reader more information about Fark, and they also cut the media some slack. For instance in the third chapter Curtis points out that sometimes the unpaid placement stories are interesting to the

public. The example he uses is that every year Ben & Jerry's free ice cream day is advertised in the form of an article, and people who like ice cream want to know that (Curtis 2007, 93).

Journalism students in particular should read this book because as future and current journalists it is good for them to know about some of the different kinds of modern day practises, especially when, as the author points out, these particular practises are terrible examples of journalism. By illustrating why Fark is not good journalism, Curtis allows aspiring journalists to make an informed choice about how much they participate in the dissemination of Fark.

Therefore, while the majority of the book is only relevant if you are looking for something funny to read, the first chapter and the chapter discussions are good for students to read, especially journalism students. Reading these chapters will allow them to better interpret the news that they encounter, understand why journalists use Fark, and know how to better avoid using Fark if they choose to pursue journalism as a career.

References

Curtis, Drew. 2007. *It's not news, it's Fark: how mass media tries to pass off crap as news*. New York: Gotham Books.