

The media's obsession with O.J. Simpson

Hiram Lee

21 September 2007

Former American hall of fame football star O.J. Simpson's recent arrest for armed robbery, kidnapping and a number of other offenses—ten felony charges in all—has provided the US news media with another opportunity to debase itself and drag its audience in the direction of an insignificant and, if possible, degrading story at the expense of serious news developments.

Simpson and a group of associates are said to have stormed into the Las Vegas hotel room of a dealer in sports memorabilia, allegedly at gunpoint, demanding the return of certain items of the former star's memorabilia, which the alleged victims intended to sell. Everyone involved, suspects and victims alike, seem to be questionable characters. An audiotape made during the alleged hold-up, with its combination of barely coherent shouting and obscenities, has been broadcast repeatedly on the cable news channels.

The media has devoted an extraordinary amount of time and resources to this latest episode as part of its longstanding and deeply unhealthy obsession with O.J. Simpson. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Simpson's arrest, or at least his reemergence in the headlines, has been met with considerable satisfaction in these circles.

The coverage of Simpson's murder trial in 1995, which made reputations and large sums of money, also brought to the forefront certain processes that had hitherto been hidden or only partially exposed: particularly the moral and political deterioration of the US media. It was at this point, for example, that the *National Enquirer*, a disreputable scandal sheet, suddenly became a legitimate news source.

Numerous "former prosecutors," including a few now clogging the airwaves, made a career for themselves based on their roles in the case. Marcia Clark, one of the prosecutors in the notorious murder trial, is herself covering the current scandal as a correspondent for the celebrity gossip show *Entertainment Tonight*.

When O.J. Simpson was acquitted at the end of his murder trial in 1995, largely as the result of his money and celebrity, it was widely perceived as a travesty of justice. This new case is being framed by sections of the media, implicitly or otherwise, as a means of setting things "right," a way to re-prosecute the original trial. CNN has dubbed the new case "OJ—The Sequel," bringing to mind those dreadful horror movies of the 1980s in which a monster thought to be finished off in one film is resurrected to take a beating in several more installments.

At the same time as news anchors and pundits babble on about Simpson, they occasionally pose the question: "Why are we so interested in O.J. Simpson?" They lament the fact that the coverage they present is so drawn out and salacious. They ask themselves and the audience if there are not more important stories to be covering. Then, with feigned regret, they return to the tawdry story at hand.

Such attempts by those in the media to attribute their own shameful behavior to the supposed demands of a coarsened, celebrity-obsessed audience—and they far overestimate the audience's interest in Simpson's latest legal battles—conveniently ignores their own role in cultivating and directing such attitudes toward celebrity culture.

To be sure, the media's coverage of scandals such as the Simpson arrest, the drinking habits of Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan, or the amount of time Paris Hilton was required to spend in jail serves a definite purpose. It channels all the audience's pent up anger and frustration onto a harmless target, in this case Simpson, whose fate, whether he is convicted or not, will have no impact whatsoever on the viewers' lives.

And so in a time when Washington is busy laying the groundwork for possible attacks against Iran, when a report by Britain's polling agency ORB (Opinion Research Business) estimates that 1.2 million violent

deaths have occurred in Iraq during the US occupation, when the US is facing a crisis in the housing market with alarming numbers of foreclosures, the top story on all the major news networks is the alleged botched robbery of some autographed footballs by a washed-up athlete.

In some cases the programming of cable news channels has amounted to coverage of Simpson or nothing at all: when MSNBC was preparing to cover Simpson's arraignment on Wednesday, they repeatedly cut to a shot of the courtroom in anticipation of Simpson's arrival. With nothing happening, they simply broadcast images of an empty room.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact