

The “Balloon Boy” hoax, celebrity culture, and the American media

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On October 15, all the major US news networks broke away from their scheduled programming to cover a breaking story about a six-year-old boy in Colorado who had reportedly been playing inside a large helium balloon when it suddenly floated away. The sensational incident drew the media’s full attention and became the subject of saturation coverage. CNN cut away from a speech President Barack Obama was delivering in New Orleans to cover the story.

News cameras filmed the balloon’s flight from helicopters while the various anchor people speculated on the boy’s condition and consulted with experts on ballooning. Initially described in the reports as an “experimental” craft, the balloon itself was designed to look like a flying saucer.

As it turned out, this “experimental” vessel said to be created by an “amateur scientist” was, in reality, constructed out of little more than some plastic tarps, aluminum foil, duct tape, and string. With a plywood and cardboard box attached to the bottom, this flimsy structure was supposed to contain the boy as he and the balloon floated 7,000 feet in the air. The balloon’s journey lasted approximately 90 minutes and spanned 60 miles.

When the balloon finally touched down and was found to be empty, there were fears that the child had fallen out in mid-flight. Authorities, including the Colorado National Guard, began a search for the child. Then another “breaking news” update came: the boy was alive. Six-year-old Falcon Heene was never in any danger. He was said to have been at home the entire time, hiding out in his attic.

It didn’t take long for suspicions to surface that the whole event had been a hoax. Such suspicions were only confirmed by a series of bizarre television

appearances by Falcon and his family. The young child became physically ill live on air during two interviews on the “Today Show” and “Good Morning America.” In an interview with Wolf Blitzer during an episode of CNN’s “Larry King Show,” when asked why he had not come out of hiding earlier, Falcon replied “We did this for the show.” His father, Richard Heene, was visibly shaken by the answer.

Authorities and media outlets soon set their sights on the father. The investigation into Heene has revealed a very troubled individual. He appears to suffer from psychological problems, having difficulty distinguishing between reality and fantasy. In a call to 911 after the launch of his balloon, he informed an operator that the outer shell of the craft was capable of emitting “a million volts” of electricity. He is allegedly a UFO enthusiast and conspiracy theorist, supposedly believing the world will end in the year 2012.

A picture has also emerged of a man unfortunately obsessed with fame and celebrity. Heene has tried for decades to make a name for himself, but never managed to do so. He lived in Hollywood for a time, took acting classes, and made an attempt at a career in stand-up comedy.

As time went on, and success still had not come, Heene’s pursuit of notoriety apparently became more reckless. He tried his hand at storm chasing, and evidently planned experiments or stunts in which he intended to drive a motorcycle into a tornado. He became fascinated by “reality television” and saw it as an opportunity for himself, an “everyman,” to break into show business.

Heene and his family were able to appear twice on the reality show “Wife Swap” (the name says virtually everything one needs to know). Another reality show to feature Heene and his family was in development with

the TLC cable network, but the latter has since closed down the project.

The balloon hoax and the official response have brought a number of recurring problems in the US to the fore. First of all, there is the terribly unhealthy celebrity culture that has so consumed Richard Heene's life, and its role in American society. This increasingly assumes a "bread and circuses" character, serving as a distraction from the most pressing social issues at a time of crisis. The details of celebrity lives are elevated to an absurd level of importance by the media, the cable news networks devoting hours to gossip and "expert" evaluations (almost always lacking the slightest insight) of the latest troubled stars.

As the living standards of millions come under assault, opportunities for success and fulfillment are stripped away, and an ever-increasing instability is thrust into the lives of masses of people, the need to live vicariously through celebrities has also grown.

This need is deliberately played upon and manipulated by the corporate media, for both ideological and monetary reasons. Out of the economic insecurity of a great many people, their sense that life holds little for them, ultimately emerges the fascination with and fixation on those who lead (or seem to lead) shiny, glamorous existences. Translated into the production of magazines, tabloids, "infotainment" and talk shows, and all the rest, this then parasitically becomes the source of massive profits.

A warped definition of success is promoted. To be famous, much-talked-about, "known" in some way, is everything. To be incredibly wealthy and connected is the ultimate fulfillment of one's life. One hears story after story of singers and performers plucked from obscurity and thrust into stardom almost overnight. For many, it all seems so close, so within reach. For someone like Heene with a fragile mental state, the fantasy can often consume the reality. His failure to "make it big" has left him desperate and perhaps damaged.

It is not clear how large a spectacle Heene intended to create with his balloon hoax. Events likely overtook him. It is doubtful he was fully aware of the implications of his actions.

As always, the instinctive response of authorities in the US to any incident of this kind, in which the actions of an individual like Heene reveal a serious degree of

emotional distress, is to make it a police matter. "Lock 'em up!" is the universal cry. Heene and his wife are expected to be charged with several crimes in the coming days, including contributing to the delinquency of a minor and attempting to influence a public servant. Heene could potentially face up to six years in prison should he be convicted.

There is also a vindictive element to the legal case against Heene. The well-to-do anchors and producers of the cable news networks were taken in hook, line, and sinker by Heene's hoax, as were law enforcement officials in Colorado. They have egg on their faces, and the embarrassment can't go unpunished.

The media coverage of the balloon hoax goes on. It all turns on a dime. Eager to provide Heene fame when they believed he was the father of a boy who survived a sensational adventure, the various news outlets will now proceed to make him infamous as a "con man" and "criminal."



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