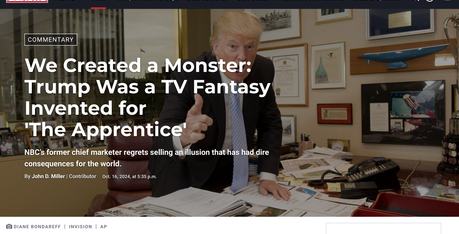

COMMENTARY

We Created a Monster: Trump Was a TV Fantasy Invented for 'The Apprentice'

NBC's former chief marketer regrets selling an illusion that has had dire consequences for the world.

By John D. Miller, Contributor Oct. 18, 2024, at 5:35 p.m.

DIANE BONDAREFF | INVISION | AP

Donald Trump poses for photographs in his Trump Tower office on June 13, 2012, in New York.

I want to apologize to America. I helped create a monster.

For nearly 25 years, I led marketing at NBC and NBCUniversal. I led the team that marketed "The Apprentice," the reality show that made Donald Trump a household name outside of New York City, where he was better known for overextending his empire and appearing in celebrity gossip columns.

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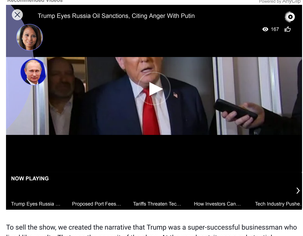

To sell the show, we created the narrative that Trump was a super-successful businessman who lived like royalty. That was the conceit of the show. At the very least, it was a substantial exaggeration; at worst, it created a false narrative by making him seem more successful than he was.

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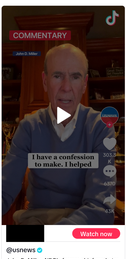
In fact, Trump declared business bankruptcy four times before the show went into production, and at least twice more during his 14 seasons hosting. The imposing board room where he famously fired contestants was a set, because his real boardroom was too old and shabby for TV.

Trump may have been the perfect choice to be the boss of this show, because more successful CEOs were too busy to get involved in reality TV and didn't want to hire random game show winners onto their executive teams. Trump had no such concerns. He had plenty of time for filming, he loved the attention and it painted a positive picture of him that wasn't true.



At NBC, we promoted the show relentlessly. Thousands of 30-second promo spots that spread the fantasy of Trump's supposed business acumen were beamed over the airwaves to nearly every household in the country. The image of Trump that we promoted was highly exaggerated. In its own way, it was "fake news" that we spread over America like a heavy snowstorm. I never imagined that the picture we painted of Trump as a successful businessman would help catapult him to the White House.

I discovered in my interactions with him over the years that he is manipulative, yet extraordinarily easy to manipulate. He has an unfillable compliment hole. No amount is too much. Flatter him and he is compliant. World leaders, including apparently Russian strongman Vladimir Putin and North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, have discovered that too.

I also found Trump remarkably thin-skinned. He aggressively goes after those who critique him and seeks retribution. That's not very businesslike — and it's certainly not presidential. This week, he threatened to use the National Guard against Americans who oppose him, calling them the "enemy from within."

I learned early on in my dealings with Trump that he thought he could simply say something over and over, and eventually people would believe it. He would say to me, "The Apprentice' — America's No. 1 TV show." But it wasn't. Not that week. Not that season. I had the ratings in front of me. He had seen and heard the ratings, but that didn't matter. He just kept saying it was the "No. 1 show on television," even after we corrected him. He repeated it on press tours too, knowing full well it was wrong. He didn't like being fact-checked back then either.

Exaggerating ratings is one thing, but spreading falsehoods about relief work of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, about immigrants eating cats and dogs, about the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, about him winning the 2020 election or countless other lies is far more dangerous.

I also learned from working with him that he has questionable judgment. At the wrap party for "The Apprentice" season three, he pitched an idea for the upcoming season. He told me we should make a team of Black players compete against white players. My first thought was: WTF?! I tried to get through to him by speaking the language he understands: money. I explained that sponsors wouldn't want to be associated with a show that pitted races against each other. But he could not understand why this was such a bad idea. (And, no, we did not use his idea.)

President Bush, Put Country Over Party

Bush and the military chiefs who served Trump know he is a threat to democracy. Their silence is unacceptable.

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While we were successful in marketing "The Apprentice," we also did irreparable harm by creating the false image of Trump as a successful leader. I deeply regret that. And I regret that it has taken me so long to go public.

Now America is facing a critical choice. Should this elderly, would-be emperor with no clothes, who is well known for stretching and abandoning the truth, be president again?

I spent 50 years successfully promoting television magic, making mountains out of molehills every day. But I say now to my fellow Americans, without any promotional exaggeration: If you believe that Trump will be better for you or better for the country, that is an illusion, much like "The Apprentice" was. Even if you are a born-and-bred Republican, as I was, I strongly urge you to vote for Kamala Harris. The country will be better off and so will you.

John D. Miller was the chief marketing officer for NBC and NBCUniversal, and retired as chair of the NBCUniversal Marketing Council.

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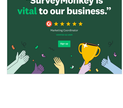

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