

Letter to Mr. Parsons

JACOB CHEN

Dear Mr. Parsons,

Two weeks ago, I bought a share of Time Warner at near 18 dollars. Currently it is at a pitiful 17 dollars and 50 cents. As a fellow shareholder I feel obligated to inform you of my concern over the path along which you intend to steer this mighty giant and to suggest a new course that without doubt will bring great benefit to all your stockholders. Of prime concern to me, and to you as well, is one major branch of our corporation, CNN, “the most trusted name in news”. In the past month, CNN’s viewership has declined a whopping 16%. I do not have to tell you how significant this decline is but I must remind you that I and other shareholders are looking to you to solve this problem.

CNN continues to broadcast the same news, or lack thereof, that through monotonous repetition have figuratively put the audience to sleep. Our society has romanticized the dauntless investigative journalist who, through his or her connections and those few in the government or business with an incorruptible moral compass, discovers the most heinous crimes, brings them forth, and urges the American public to take action. Americans were riveted by Woodward and Bernstein’s investigation into Watergate. Americans honor Upton Sinclair for his muckraking, or as we know today, for his safeguarding of the public interest. But where is CNN’s once inspirational staff of investigative journalists? In 1998, CNN fired April Oliver and Jack Smith for their investigation into the use of nerve gas in the Vietnam War. In 1999, CNN fired Peter Arnett, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist for his controversial investigative report “Valley of Death.” Fox News, your deadly adversary certainly has no investigative journalists (or for that matter journalists). Through focusing on the same garbage—for lack of a better word (and without using any profanities), CNN has descended from its enlightened post to compete in the muck with Fox. In doing so, you have jeopardized CNN’s respectability, its only true edge in the market. As a shareholder, I urge you to

restore CNN's name through the reinstigation of true investigative journalism.

Yes sensationalism is popular, and therefore profitable. But in this monopolistically competitive market, it is imperative to distance yourself from the profit-hungry bottom dwellers of the market. I applaud the work you have done with the Warner Bros. and with HBO, but what has worked there has apparently not worked for CNN. But even assuming that your staff of advisors is right, assuming that Americans are base creatures who seek sex-capades or bombs bursting in air, by descending to sensationalism you forgo the potential for vast power. You forgo the power to move America.

As a shareholder, I own a part of the company. And therefore, the more power the company accrues, the more power I accrue (and the more power, by far, you accrue.) Imagine for a moment what would happen if you reinstate investigative journalism. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "If it were left to me to decide whether we should have a government without a free press or a free press without a government, I would prefer the latter." In the eyes of many, you wield more power than the Senate; after all, the Senate can't start a war by itself. If you "discover," or rather broadcast what so many have discovered already—the not-so-public agendas of the Bush presidency—you have the power to destroy this presidency and perhaps even decide the next. Campaign contributions from corporations, American and otherwise, play a vital role in the selection of politicians for office. But you have more power than all those corporations combined. What is even a billion dollars compared to choosing the President? After all, neither Perot nor Forbes, with their immense personal fortunes, could purchase an office as powerful as that of the presidency. By refusing to give them coverage or air time, you defeated their millions, without spending a nickel.

But to be honest, neither power nor wealth is of overwhelming concern to me; otherwise I might've bought two shares, or invested in Fox News to begin with. What is far more important than empowering CNN is what CNN must do with this power. I do not believe that you lust only after wealth and power for yourself. When you were younger, you must have seen on TV great heroes like Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. struggle to bring justice to all Americans. You must have listened fervently to his idealistic speeches and his dreams of a better America. And at Dartmouth, you must have studied ethics, sociology, or philosophy. And it is from these fields, from William M. Evan, a professor of sociology, and R. Edward Freeman, a professor of business, I bring to you a novel concept: your responsibility to the stakeholders of your company.

“Stakeholders are those groups who have a stake in or claim on the firm. Specifically ... suppliers, customers, employees, stockholders, and the local community, as well as management... each of these stakeholder groups has a right not to be treated as a means to some end, and therefore must participate in determining the future direction of the firm in which they have a stake” (298). So now I exhort you again, this time not as a shareholder, but as a stakeholder, a customer. I have watched CNN for years, from the television of my residence and the television of the hotels in nations far away. I urge you as a customer of CNN to cover the truly ground breaking news that the government seeks to hide, or at least throw under Lincoln’s bed.

The relation between a customer and a corporation is sacrosanct. “The right relationship is everything,” according to the bank where I store my not very impressive holdings. When I put my money in Chase, I expect my money to be invested wisely and the bank to divide some of its earnings and provide them to me in the form of interest. And the bank expects that I, and all its other customers, will leave our funds there for a duration and not suddenly withdraw all our holdings. The right relationship here ensures that we both achieve our ends and prosper.

But what is *your* relationship with your viewers? It isn’t quite the same as mine with my bank, certainly. People watch the news to find out what is happening at home and abroad. They know that it is inefficient and expensive for them to gather their own information, as it is for bank customers to lend out their own money. And that is what you at times overlook. Your viewers are your customers, and in you we trust. *We* trust you to provide information that is of importance to us. In return we provide you, directly and indirectly, with money to sustain your business, and add to your already substantial holdings. We trust you to invest our money wisely. When that trust is violated, there is no longer a relationship. Because when that trust is violated, we will no longer be your customers.

Just as important is the relationship between a corporation and the community. “The local community grants the firm the right to build facilities and, in turn, it benefits from the tax base and economic and social contributions of the firm” (303). America, with its unmatched military technology, was unable to defeat the ragtag Vietnamese peasants because we overlooked the importance of fostering support between ourselves and the people and environment where we operated. America has learned from its mistake. In Iraq, we try to foster good relations through providing food, supplies, but most of all, we try to contribute socially through the formation of a good and stable democracy. Certainly this has not met with complete success, and just how

much success is one of the many pieces of information we should hear about, on a regular basis, from CNN. But whatever resistance we have so far faced in Iraq is nothing compared to the dogged resistance of the Vietnamese people after they saw American planes carpet bomb their civilization to ashes.

How do you expect CNN to successfully defeat the other four or five major news conglomerates if you neglect your duties to where you broadcast your own news? Each of these, Viacom with CBS and Comedy Central (which apparently has mastered the art of combining news with entertainment without diminishing either), The News Corporation, Disney, and General Electric, has similar obligations. But none of them claims to be the “most trusted name in news.” And therefore none of them has as great an obligation and as much a responsibility to support and assist the community as CNN.

I ask of you, as a member of the community where you distribute your merchandise, to think of the effects your broadcast has on my community. It is in my country where you broadcast your information. It is in my city, my borough, my district, and my block. As a community member, a New Yorker, an American who was attending class blocks away from the Twin Towers on September 11th, an American who then watched CNN for days to know what happened, and what will happen, I ask you to consider the effect your broadcast has, and to then do what is necessary to support our community, our nation.

Naturally this arouses the question of what constitutes supporting our community. CNN received the 2001 Cable Television Public Affairs Association (CTPAA) Beacon Award for community service. And you yourself are the Chairman of the Apollo Theater Foundation. You’ve brought in great art that enriched your community and brought forth great artists to enrich all communities. But there is another method: publish news vital to society.

Robert Kennedy Jr. recently spoke to a large gathering, of which I was a part, about the Clean Air Act forged by the Bush Administration. According to him, the new Clean Air Act would serve not to clean the air, but rather to give mercury producing industries more leeway in releasing sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. He spoke at great length, but his accusations seemed almost chimerical. I scoffed at the notion that Bush would put our fellow Americans’ health at risk, and that he could do so without attracting the attention of the American people. And so I searched CNN.com to try to discover the truth behind these allegations. My extensive search yielded one hit, hit number 25: “Church group slams Bush on Clean Air Act.”

Legislation that allows toxins to be dumped into the air is information critical to our society. Legislation that physically harms every American is knowledge vital to the public interest. Yet that article was all CNN saw fit to post. Recently, Bush addressed the emerging energy crisis in America and his solutions—e.g. burning coal. In another press conference, he spoke of social security, Iraq, Russia, and almost every domestic and international issue. The next day, instead of these, CNN choose to fill the air time with Jennifer Wilbanks, the runaway thought to be kidnapped, bride.

You already have HBO and Cinemax to indulge our whims for gratuitous sex and violence. I am asking you for CNN, for its reputation and for its powerful responsibility, to bring to light all the events of this administration, the next administration, and the one after that, to the American people.

Though I may come to regret this, I nevertheless feel obligated to quote from a comic that I've loved, and suspect that you've loved as well during your childhood. "With great power comes great responsibility." I've already established the vast power the media holds. It was the media that forced Nixon into resignation, it was the media that ended the long and exhausting Vietnam War, it was the media that gave Americans the encouragement and assurance to win two world wars, it was the media that started the Spanish-American war, and it was the media that united us and protected us during the American revolution, with Paul Revere being perhaps the most renowned reporter of all time. "With great power comes great responsibility" was the motto of Spiderman, the great superhero. But not all superheroes have to reside within comics. What distinguishes a superhero from a run of the mill hero? Superpowers. Spiderman had his spider sense. And Martin Luther King had the power to move America.

King had tremendous power in the black community. With his inspirational words, he found he could rouse a crowd into action. Some have said the Civil Rights movement would never have progressed as it did had it not been for King's inspirational leadership. On April 16th 1963, he wrote from Birmingham Jail a letter to his fellow clergymen. The letter could've gone many ways. He could have agreed with his fellow clergymen. He could have written "You are indeed right, we must wait for justice. We see now that our actions have done nothing but hurt our cause and my people. I will no longer condone these acts, and I urge all of my people to wait. Justice is near, but if we run towards it, we risk losing it all. So I counsel that we wait for our white brethren, who labor night and day for us, to finally succeed in their task." Had he written that, he might have lived until 70, maybe 80. He might have, through holding back the civil rights movement, filled his own pockets with

the gold of those who wanted him to wait. But he didn't. Instead he wrote, "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. ... We must come to see, with one of our distinguish jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied'" (338). He used his power to demand justice, not later, but now. His power was undeniable, and his heroism globally acclaimed. This makes him a superhero. King had power over perhaps a third of America, and used every ounce to do what was right, to bring justice where there was none. You have power over all of America. How many ounces have you used? You were part of the "Dream Team" that signed on to construct a memorial to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. But what better way is there to honor him than to follow in his footsteps?

There will be those among your board who would repeat the mantra "profit is supreme." In the essay "Why Doesn't GM Sell Crack?," Michael Moore addresses that exact point. "If profit is supreme, why not sell crack? GM doesn't sell crack because... we, as a society, have determined that crack destroys people's lives. It ruins entire communities... That's why we wouldn't let a company like GM sell it, no matter what kind of profit they could make" (369). Certainly not all of Moore's demagoguery is truthful, but in this rare instance, he speaks the truth. Once there was federal regulation in America that forced the media to allot airtime to information beneficial to the public's interest. I agree with Reagan that such legislation prevented the media from reaching its true potential. Nonetheless, it dismays me how quickly CNN has simply given up serving the public interest. Capitalism is not good at thinking a hundred years into the future, but you are. Think of what would happen to America when a hundred years from now our streams are filled with mercury and our air with smog. Think what would happen to America when a hundred years from now the laws that have protected us are stripped one after another so that there are no courts left, save those that reside within vast cathedrals. Think what would happen to America when we've earned so much hatred from the global community that they unite against us and our cities become uninhabitable piles of ashes beneath a mushroom cloud and the grounds poisoned forever as with the fields of Carthage were by their Roman conquerors. You have the power to prevent all this. You have the tools, the prestige, and the resources to pierce the shroud imposed by our government. You can make sure that our government does not spend American lives to acquire wealth for the few. You are the stewards of democracy and America is your charge. Thus I beg you to restore the media to the pivotal role it once held. Use the power we have given to you to do what is right. Do what is right

for us, for our nation, and for our children and their children. Do what is right for our amber waves of grain, our lush, bountiful forests, and our pristine streams. Do what is right for you, your shareholders, and your stakeholders. You call yourself “the most trusted name in news.” Now live up to your name, or give it away.

Sincerely, passionately, hopefully

Jacob Chen

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