

Filmmaker Jen Senko explains the 'epidemic' of right-wing media indoctrination – how it originated, how it divides us, and how to respond

BY JOANNE ZUHL
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Jen Senko acknowledges that brainwashing is a strong term, but it's the one she thinks best describes what happened to her father.

After growing up with Walter Cronkite telling it how it was, Senko's father switched allegiance to the new brand of media, heralded in by Rush Limbaugh and Fox News. And with that transition, she said, he went from being a fairly non-political Democrat to a hate-spewing right-wing conservative, distributing canned ultra-conservative emails and starting fights with his now alienated family.

It wasn't just that he adopted a different political view. He was a different person, an entirely different character, she said, one who was always angry, insulting immigrants, women, homosexuals and anything Fox told him to.

He's the everyman in Senko's award-winning documentary "The Brainwashing of My Dad," which was released theatrically last month and is now available through video-on-demand outlets. The film is narrated by Senko and Matthew Modine and features the art of Bill Plympton.

But this film is not just the sad story of a family driven apart by polarizing media tactics. Senko's father is a synecdoche of sorts – an example of something small illustrating something much bigger, in this case the nationwide erosion of our democracy and the rise of corporate rule.

A filmmaker by trade, Senko extends her research into the political and corporate origins of this transformation and its implications for the country, which she said is in the midst of "an epidemic."

Jen Senko: My dad could be any dad. My dad is many dads. My dad is many moms, sisters, brothers. What he represents is the broken families and the broken countries that have occurred because of this destructive media. For people who doubt how powerful media can be, they only have to look at Rwanda and the hate radio they had which drove the Hutus and the Tutsis to killing their own family members and friends. It's just very powerful. So I look at this media through the lens of my dad. And I think that's one reason why people can relate to it. That title jumps out at people. Because that's what it feels like. They contact me, knowing intuitively what it is about. It is a relief to hear somebody say that word, even those not attached to it. In fact, I had many people, mostly liberals, try to talk me out of using the word brainwashing. But I had decided on that a long time ago, and the way people responded to it, people in the trenches, made me know that this is the right title.

Joanne Zuhl: There have been other films criticizing right-wing media. But bringing your father into it makes it palpable.

J.S.: Right. I didn't want to leave the emotion out of it. That's so very much a part of it.

J.Z.: This is not just some right-wing organic phenomenon. This was media by design. This was a concerted effort. Give us an overview of how this really jelled with a great deal of intention.



"They talk to people about how something like Fox News works. It activates the amygdala, and once that reptilian part of the brain is activated, rational thinking goes out the window."

JEN SENKO,
CREATOR OF
"THE BRAINWASHING
OF MY DAD"

J.S.: It started in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson beat Barry Goldwater by a landslide and pundits were saying the right wing is dead. They said, "How can we strike back? How can we get people to vote Republican and think that Republican interests are best for them, even though they're not?" It started with the media, with media watch groups calling the media liberal – to get that so ingrained in people's minds. They were very successful in that. It just builds and builds.

And we have Roger Ailes helping Nixon, trying to make him appealing to the average person and more appealing on TV. And his memo called "How to put the GOP on TV news," was an early blueprint, if you will, for Fox News.

And I should really call it right-wing, rather than Republican. Because when I was young, Republicans were people next-door you had barbecues with.

J.Z.: Not the Republicans of today.

J.S.: No! They were normal people! There wasn't any big deal. Now it's like teams.

Probably one of the biggest things was the Lewis Powell memo, called "Attack of the American Free Enterprise System."

Conservatism wasn't popular. Neither was business. You had somebody like Ralph Nader pointing out where business was screwing over the little people. And the business community was worried about this. So Powell sent this memo to the Chamber of Commerce, laying out the ways they could get the idea of free-market ideology out into the ethosphere so that people would believe it.

The idea was to get professors and universities to teach their ideology. And to buy media to get their ideas out there. Let's start publishing houses so we can get journals and our own, quote-unquote, facts out there. It all pushed this right-wing ideology, and it became pretty extreme. I don't even know that Powell intended for it to be that extreme. And they came up with the think tanks that would come out with these findings that would always back up that the free market is just market.

There were lots of things like this along the way: the abolishment of the Fairness Doctrine and the Telecommunications Reform Act, which was a bipartisan act that happened

BRAINWASHED

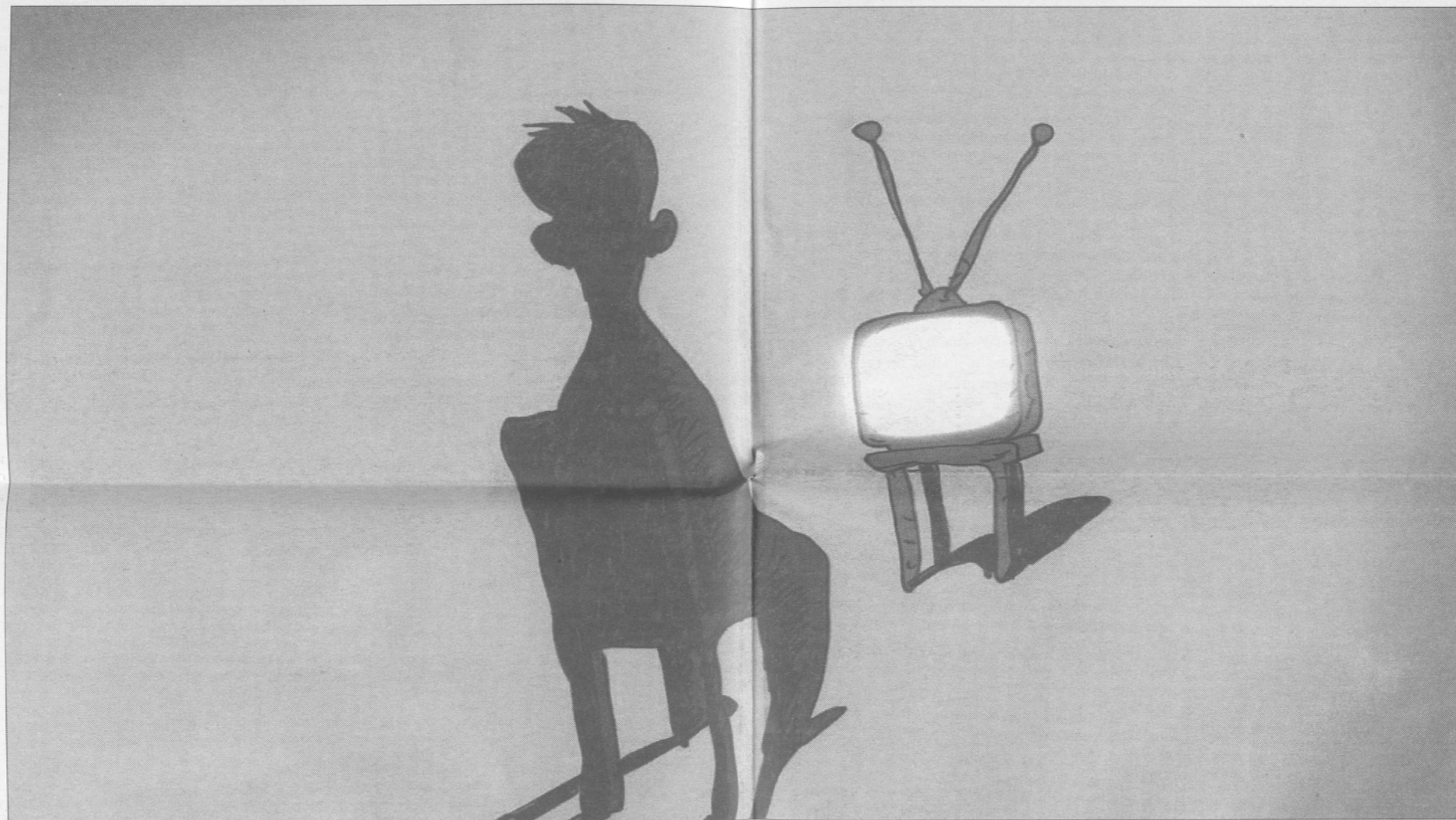


ILLUSTRATION BY BILL PLYMPTON/COURTESY OF JSENKO PRODUCTIONS

"The Brainwashing of My Dad" features animations by Portland artist Bill Plympton.

under Bill Clinton, but you had all the media companies by then just flooding both the parties with money.

J.Z.: And now the Powell Doctrine has grown up into the Citizens United decision (in which the Supreme Court held that political spending is a form of protected speech).

J.S.: If you saw a tree, the Citizens United decision would be a really big branch of it.

J.Z.: And this is the '70s, when a lot of this was coming together, and you had the '60s generation coming into its own. There was a generational battle.

J.S.: Oh, it scared the shit out of them.

J.Z.: It's fine to mix in business, but then you mix in a values system, the family values.



COURTESY OF JSENKO PRODUCTIONS

In an image from the documentary "The Brainwashing of My Dad," pollster Frank Luntz, left, shares the screen with Fox News' Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly.

J.S.: Family values that really end up dividing the family and dividing the country.

J.Z.: But it also seems like the hate speech – that is just window dressing for the real goal.

J.S.: Business power. You see people voting on their moral interests and against their own economic interests. And isn't it interesting too, it just came out about Nixon and the drug war. That the drug war was just to paint hippies as no-good pot smokers and blacks as dangerous drug users. It just goes to show you that, yeah, there are conspiracies, and conspiracy is a bad word for good reason. A conspiracy really just means a plan made in secret, and a rather nefarious one, and this was a very successful one.

J.Z.: Liberals have tried to play the same game, too. I remember Air America (the liberal talk-radio network), which I don't think exists

any longer.

J.S.: I would say they were slow learners. They were amateurs. First of all, they don't have the money behind them, and they had no idea what they were up against. It was like flies running into tanks. There's just no comparison. You had billions flooding into these think tanks to back up the thoughts. It was so beautifully completely conceived if you take the hideousness out of it. The left just couldn't compete. So anyone who says the left has tried to be comparable, they failed miserably. I don't think anybody had the idea of the vastness of it, either.

J.Z.: You talked about the Powell memo. Are there other watershed moments in media that you think really illustrate when we turned a corner?

J.S.: The Fairness Doctrine was established in 1949 after America saw how insidious Nazi Germany could be with their propaganda. But that was abolished in 1987, and lo and behold, 1988, Rush Limbaugh goes national. There's money behind the right-wing guys. That was a watershed moment. Also the Telecommunications Reform Act of 1996. Clinton and even Newt Gingrich were in it. It was called the "reform" act because the Telecommunications Act itself was also to prevent one person or one group from having control over people's opinions, that the airwaves are supposed to be for the public. So what the reform act did was to allow for consolidation, and coincidentally, later that same year, in 1996, Fox was created by Rupert Murdoch.

You know, I hear from people all over the world saying we're having the same problem. Rupert Murdoch is taking over our media and pushing this really right-wing agenda. It's not just us.

J.Z.: And certainly this election cycle: The GOP frontrunner by a mile is a man who is not only a proven liar, but one who publicly calls other people liars. It's entertainment, but no one seems to care what's true or not anymore. You can find sources that argue both sides of anything, facts be damned. What is your perspective on the GOP election this year?

J.S.: Well, as everybody else is realizing, the right created a monster, and now he's biting them in the ass.

Who's at fault largely is the media. First the media that created him, and then the media that paid more attention to him than a sane Bernie Sanders. It's because it's about ratings. News shouldn't be about ratings. It should be boring like in my parents day when they were watching Walter Cronkite.

J.Z.: Where the only set design is a clock on the wall.

J.S.: Exactly. We talk about the tactics in the movie, and one of the tactics is these circus-type colors and images, and moving lights – the scroll. It's mesmerizing, hypnotic. To make it look legit, but it's not.

J.Z.: You've heard from many other people who have experienced this, too. What do you go through when you hear those stories?

J.S.: It's amazing. It's astounding. I feel so bad for these people. They're desperate. Pretty much the common denominator is anger that their parent or loved one, husbands sometimes – you can't talk to them. You can't reach them, because they're angry and that somehow they find a way, no matter what the conversation is, to bring up their political views, as if the house is on fire and they have to tell you about it. It's heartbreaking to me.

I write everybody back who writes me because I know how they're feeling. I know what they're going through. I know how frustrating it is.

J.Z.: Did you find that it was more widespread than you thought?

J.S.: Oh yeah. I was really troubled by that. I was astounded by that. I had no idea. I would say for every sixth person you talk to, there is somebody who knows somebody it happened to. It's frightening. It's really frightening. It's like mass propaganda on just a huge scale.

J.Z.: Who are the most vulnerable? It seems to resonate with some and drives others to maddening anger. Have you figured out what that line is?

J.S.: My dad had his master's in electronic engineering. He wasn't a stupid person. But what I would say about him is he wasn't self-reflective. He was also gullible. You could tell him things, and he wouldn't question them. Sort of a naïveté about him. Like Roger Ailes says, the reason TV works is the thinking is done for you. Plus it's intoxicating. You're in a heightened state of fight or flight. Your adrenals are going, and there's an addictive quality to that.

J.Z.: What recourse is there?

J.S.: I think that there's a bunch of different things we can do. I did meet a group along the way called HearYourselfThink.org. We kind of teamed up because they talk to people about how something like Fox News works. It activates the amygdala, and once that reptilian part of the brain is activated, rational thinking goes out the window. So they have ideas about reaching the person. Asking them questions. Presenting them with facts, as long as you do it in a calm way. You can't just say, no you're wrong, because then it just becomes a heated argument. Also, there are people pushing to get the Fairness Doctrine reinstated. Hopefully people will know what the Telecommunications Act was and push for the reform part to be thrown out. There are little things people can do, like on Code Pink's site, there's a petition you can sign to get Fox out of the YMCA on a national level.

J.Z.: That's a good point, everywhere you go, every waiting room or hotel breakfast lounge has Fox in it.

J.S.: Everyone has to speak up. We can't always be comfortable. And read and support independent media!

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