



Explaining American Politics: What's Left of Media Bias

Jerry Krase (September 12, 2008)



The American Right often complains of left-wing media bias, yet the big-time American media, Fox, NBC, CBS, Bloomberg, et al are hardly Marxist-Leninist Kommissars.



When I read Italian newspapers and watch Italian television news programs I know that political objectivity is not a problem for them as there is no claim of, or even illusion about, it. You get essentially what you paid for. It actually is the same in America, however, much of The Media, especially major newspapers and networks insist that they practice a form of “journalism” as defined in 2 b of the Merriam-Webster.com dictionary: “writing characterized by a direct presentation of facts or description of events without an attempt at interpretation.” For example, many newspaper publishers pledge to separate opinion (open bias) from the news pages and save it for the editorial pages or its “columns.” The most respectable radio and television networks make similar claims. “The Media” or “The Press” as it is called in the 1st Amendment of the US Constitution, is given special status and privileges in America based on the logical assumption that in a democracy access to information must be maximized. It follows that its expression must also be guaranteed.

Freedom of the Press doesn’t work without Freedom of Speech. Objectivity, although “devotedly to be wished,” is not guaranteed and is also a dangerous illusion. According to The New York Times reporter David Carr, in the current battle for the US Presidency the “Bead on The Press” has clearly been drawn by our Alaskan Governor cum soccer mom Sarah Palin, who “...learned quickly, these past few days, that if you’re not a member in good standing of the Washington elite, then some in the media consider a candidate unqualified for that reason alone,” Carr also noted that Palin, who “... clearly understands the power of words, had a way of pronouncing media — “MEE-de-ah” — that made it sound like something legless and slithering. Despite the protestations to the contrary everyone knows that The “MEE-de-ah” with which you disagree is lying.

One does not need dissertations on propaganda, semiotics, and simulacra to make the point. I recently got an e-mail from a distant relative which went something like this: a motorcyclist saves a little girl from a ferocious lion. The act is witnessed by a New York Times reporter who asks him about his political affiliation. “Republican”, he says. The next day on the front page of the paper appears: “Republican Biker Gang Member Assaults African Immigrant And Steals His Lunch.”

There are two important lessons in this story. The first is that the most objective of all major American newspapers, “The Old Gray Lady,” publishing “All the News That’s Fit to Print” has fooled none of the fools. The second is that the reporters of “the paper of record” always ask the political affiliation of those they interview. Only people who have no idea that David Brooks and William Kristol are featured on the most important pages of The Times could believe such nonsense. The fear of news bias, at least of the left-wing kind, is so great that because of complaints by the Karl Rove inspired McCain campaign MSNBC removed its “Incendiary Hosts” from their news anchor seats. But the fear of offending people’s sensibilities evidently doesn’t appear to affect McCain-Palin supporters such as Lynn Westmoreland, a conservative Republican from Georgia, who revealed to the world that the subtext of many attacks on Barack Obama is that he’s really “uppity.”

One might assume Republicans will again attack Obama for underplaying the race card. For me The Times and other Media that actually try to be fair and balanced, all too often bend over backwards, to the point of equivocation, when it comes to the toughest of issues. Both sides of the story are presented even when one isn’t worth the effort. That’s not objectivity but stupidity. For example, the “surge” hasn’t worked, unless one defines it as the “surge of money” into the hands of former Saddam Hussein Sunni warriors who have been responsible for a couple of thousand US casualties. The US has been paying “them” not to kill “us” and in future will have to pay the Shiite government of Iraq and the Iraqi army not to kill them... at least until we move most of our troops to Afghanistan (or Iran, or Pakistan) where we can repeat the mistakes we made in Iraq. According to Erica Goode, “Come Oct. 1, the Iraqi government will take over responsibility for paying and directing the Sunni-dominated citizen patrols known as Awakening Councils that operate in and around Baghdad,... .



Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of American forces in Iraq, has said that the American military pays approximately 99,000 Awakening members across Iraq stipends of about \$300 a month. About 5,200 others have been absorbed into the Iraqi security forces. Another 15,000 or so were given civilian jobs or accepted into training programs. There are many in The Media who are so intimidated by their corporate sponsors and publishers that they avoid mentioning the obvious limitations of War Hero cum Presidential candidate John McCain.

One who is not to be intimidated is Saul Friedman who writes for Newsday. In a recent Gray Matters column he called a spade a spade about Age and the Presidential Candidates, "As I noted June 21, McCain's age in and of itself should not be an issue. But McCain was badly injured when his plane was shot down over Vietnam in 1967; he suffered physical torture and psychological trauma during more than five years as a prisoner, and since 2000 he has had surgery twice for melanoma, an especially dangerous form of skin cancer. As someone in my 70s who has been through illness, I know the risks and possible consequences of aging. Doesn't McCain?" It amazes me that it is so commonplace to talk and write about the dominance of left-wing, or liberal media in the United States when every major source is owned or controlled by profit-seeking corporate or other, related, sponsors. The idea that they would use their own resources to commit suicide is beyond absurd. Even the relatively dependable "public" organs of information such as PBS and NPR have moved to the right in search of replacement funds as government subsidies have been withdrawn.

The World-wide Web is also slowly being carved up into corporate spheres of influence, and the voices of independent bloggers like me may eventually be drowned out by ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, FOX, BLOOMBERG, clones or spin-offs. I may be wrong, but pretending to be un-biased is a big part of the problem.

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