

Research Notes and Commentary:

The Rise of the New Partisan Press: Forward into the Past

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Abstract

Something may be happening to not only the central role of the press, but also to how the press itself conceives of that role. It can be argued that in just the last five to 10 years, the nonpartisan, disinterested model of mainstream journalism which dominated most of the 20th century has begun to erode. As a result, it is possible that the fundamental nature of the profession may be changing. Core professional questions are worth asking: Why is this return to partisanship occurring now? What are the historical antecedents? How does this fit in with society's typical expectations of the press? How should the still-independent media respond? How are journalistic standards being adhered to, undermined and/or redefined? What are the implications for the future of both journalism and journalism education?

Alarm bells in the night. The jarring sound of breaking glass. Oh, the horror! The rise of the new partisanship in the press in the last four or five years undermines the very core purposes of journalism. If you believe that the fundamental goal of journalism is to help bring people together in the creation of a democratic society, to supply, as John Courtney Murray argued, the consent of the governed, these must be troubling times.¹

Experience and evidence from the last presidential election is certainly persuasive. A few items: One, *New York Times* man Rick Lyman was ejected from Dick Cheney's entourage for being "all twisted in one direction".² *Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger, perhaps in defense, said that it was "other news outlets which enjoy their role as actors in the political theatre of the absurd".³ Addressing a panel last year that included Len Downie, Michael Kinsey, and Ethan Bonner, *On the Media's* Brooke Gladstone said, "We don't believe in objectivity any more. We know it isn't possible."⁴

The *New York Observer's* response to CBS in response to the embarrassments of RATHERGATE was "Give up the ghost. Stop riding a dead horse. Come out of the closet. Drop this objectivity thing and take the only rational course imaginable to you. Turn CBS into an antidote for Fox News."⁵

[Pause for effect.]

Did someone mention Fox News? Arguably it was the rise of Fox News during the election which brought the larger issue of partisanship into focus for many of us. At the Republican National Convention, Fox carried Bush's acceptance speech to 7.3 million viewers, dwarfing network NBC, its nearest competitor, with only 1.4 million.⁶ Some argue that was a turning point, a phase change toward a more partisan news culture, with which we will live for a long time. It's interesting to note in passing that at first Fox News tended to disclaim its partisanship, but it was never terribly convincing. In the words of author Anna Quindlen, "It's not as if any of us went, 'Oh my God! Fox News is pro-Bush!'"⁷

But this past day, Scott Norvell, Fox's London bureau chief, wrote, perhaps less than half in jest:

Even we at Fox News manage to get some lefties on the air occasionally, and often let them finish their sentences before we club them to death and feed the scraps to Karl Rove and Bill O'Reilly....Fox News, is after all a private channel, and our presenters are quite open about where they stand on particular stories. That's our appeal. People watch us because people know what they're getting."⁸

There is of course a history to partisanship in the press. A politically biased form of journalism was dominant before the advent of the penny press in the 1830s. Recent scholarship has, in fact, shown that remained the norm in many areas until late in the 19th century, only to be supplanted, around the turn of the century, by a general acceptance of objectivity—a journalistic standard so ably studied by such scholars as Michael Schudson, David Mindich and Matthew Gentzkow. In many cases, it appears that economic forces played a large role in this transformation.⁹

So now, the wheel may be turning again. And what William Raspberry called "Foxidation"—a lovely word—is not the only culprit.¹⁰ Additional non-Fox examples abound. For example, MSNBC persisted in using a pollster that previously worked for Newt Gingrich and William Simon. *The Wall Street Journal's* Iraq correspondent once called the situation there "a foreign policy failure."¹¹ And so we come to the central question: Is journalism destined to become a "battlefield of warring bias?"¹² Is the goal, in the words of Roy Greensdale of *The Guardian*, "Wanting not to annoy your readers by telling them things they don't want to hear"?¹³ Are we, in the words of CNN's Aaron Brown, "in a time where people only want to hear that which they agree with"?¹⁴

"It is almost as though," wrote Matthew Klam in the *New York Times Magazine*, "in a time of great national discord, you don't want to know both sides of the issue. The once-soothing voice of the non-ideological press has become, to many readers, a secondary concern, a luxury, even something suspect. It is hard to listen to calm and rational debate when you think the building is burning."¹⁵

With all due respect, I would suggest that this is not a good thing, an unacceptable outcome, a trend to be turned around. And so, how to fix it? I admit I have no grand plan, just a few observations. First, I am convinced that blogs are not the answer. They are interesting and will probably prove to be important, but I doubt they will solve this problem. Indeed, much like

the new partisan press itself, many are, as one observer noted, informed by a belief in a "politically driven shift in the nature of facts."¹⁶

Second, if we are to understand that the public has clearly become more skeptical of what it sees and hears and reads, then the answer must be more truth, not less truth. Less bias, not more bias. They want the whole story. In the words of Bryan Keefer, an editor at Spinsanity.org, "not just the he said/she said, not just the latest factoid."¹⁷ They want and, I would argue, can handle the truth. As Robert McChesney has observed, "That's the value genuine journalism does in a free society. That is the payoff."¹⁸

Next, as a profession we need to adopt a whole new set of standards involving the ideas of transparency and accountability. And the good news is that, by resisting the current trend, journalism will not only be providing the public with what it needs, but amazingly, what it also wants. Surveys such as those conducted by the Pew Foundation's Center for the People and the Press¹⁹ consistently confirm that most Americans say they want, not partisan spin, but truth-seeking journalism.

They want it, they clearly need it, and, I would argue, they certainly deserve it.

ENDNOTES:

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4. Brooke Gladstone, "Journalists as People," *On the Media*, 10 September 2004, <http://www.wnyc.org/onthemedi/transcripts/transcript_091004_people.html>.
5. Bruce Feirstein, "Memo to Rather: Out-Fox the Critics--Go Left, Old Man," *New York Observer*, 21 September 2004, <<http://observer.com/pages/newyorkdiary.asp>>.
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9. See Michael Schudson, "The Emergence of the Objectivity Norm in American Journalism" in Michael Hechter and Karl-Dieter Opp, eds., *Social Norms*, New York: Russell Sage, 2001; David T.Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How "Objectivity" Came to Define American Journalism*, New York: New York University Press, 1998; and Matthew Gentzkow. Edward L. Glaeser and Claudia Golden, "The Rise of the Fourth Estate: How Newspapers Became Informative and Why It Mattered," presented at NBER Conference on Corruption and Reform, Salem, MA, 31 May 2004.
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13. Quoted in Sarah Lyall, "British Newspapers Chose Side and Square Off," *New York Times*, 5 May 2005, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/05/international/europe/05press.html>>.
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17. Bryan Keefer, "You Call That News? I Don't," *Washington Post*, 12 September 2004, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A13377-2004Sep11>>.
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19. The results of the survey and the Pew Center's director, Andy Kohut, were cited in Alan Murray, "As in the Olden Days, U.S. Media Reflect the Partisan Divide," *Wall Street Journal*, 14 September 2004.

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