

Attack the Messenger Blame the Messenger

Politicians won the war against the media with a simple rule: first, attack the messenger.

The modern era of American politicians subduing the media began in 1988 with the election of the first President Bush. He ran against the liberal-leaning base of the national media establishment and won.

Liberals also attack the media. Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean, a liberal Democrat, had this to say after losing his 2004 bid for the presidency: “The media is a failing institution in this country. They are not maintaining their responsibility to maintain democracy.”¹

Dean’s criticism is ironic. It was the media that made him famous. He rose to the top of the heap in the year before the 2004 Democratic primaries, thanks largely to the campaign press corp’s fascination with his dark-horse, Internet-based candidacy. He was even dubbed the front-runner before a single vote was cast.

But it was also the media that knocked him down after his loss in the first voting contest, the Iowa caucuses in January 2004. The news media obsessed on the intensity of Dean’s feisty concession speech on caucus night, intended to rally hundreds of disappointed but still enthusiastic supporters. The “Dean scream,” as it was labeled, was roundly criticized as a sign that the energetic politician might be a bit loopy.

Dean never recovered from the moment. His trajectory is a cautionary tale for politicians who rely too much on so-called media momentum in campaigns. As the saying goes, “If you live by the tube, you die by the tube.”

It is, therefore, not unusual that Dean ended up so bitter about the media’s role. Politicians almost instinctively blame the media when things go wrong.

Attacking the messenger always finds a receptive audience.

It’s human nature. When you don’t want to believe something, what do you do? First, you blame the messenger.

If the doctor has bad news, get a second opinion. If your bank statement doesn’t balance, maybe it’s the bank’s fault. If you get a bad grade in school, the teacher is out to get you.

Got a bad review at work? The boss just doesn’t understand you.

Sometimes the messenger is wrong. But many times you eventually have no choice but to accept what you do not want to hear.

So it is with the news. If you don’t like what you read on the front page of your newspaper, maybe the reporter is biased or just plain stupid. If the evening news on television doesn’t please you, blame the messenger.

Consuming news with skepticism is a good thing. Plenty of reporting is biased, misinformed, and, yes, just plain stupid.

But these days, public distrust of the news media is at a dangerously low point. Our instincts to blame the messenger are confirmed again and again.

A *New York Times* reporter is fired for making up stories.

A *USA Today* reporter and several editors are fired for series of plagiarism incidents over a number of years.

CBS News executives are forced to admit that *60 Minutes* producers relied on a forged document to question a president’s military service record.

Online news is no exception. Often, you can bet that if a story is only online, it’s probably wrong.

We're still waiting for the pictures of George Bush dancing naked on a bar table. Years ago, Web newsies breathlessly reported we'd soon see them.

Sometimes, however, it is a story so hot or troubling that the mainstream media does not want to touch it.

Word of Bill Clinton's sexual affair in the White House first circulated on the Internet. Even when a major newsmagazine finally decided to run the story, it leaked onto the Web before it was published.

Thanks to the Internet and its Net-citizen journalists known as bloggers, anyone with a modem can spread lies or truth. It is often difficult to know the difference.

The old ways of journalism are long gone—and for good. There was a time when a handful of elites in New York City and Washington, D.C., set the news agenda.

A network news chief riding to work in his limousine would read the *New York Times* and take his cues for what would lead the evening news. A president or his top aides could call an influential reporter for a major newspaper and feed him a story that would drive the next day's news cycle.

As radio personality Don Imus once said of top news chiefs, "They write the news for their friends."²

The Downside of the Media's Fall

But all is not good in the demise of professionals in the news business. That same reporter who got the president's scoop one day could just as easily turn around and raise important questions about a political leader's decisions that fostered positive change.

Despite their faults, those who once set the national news agenda were committed to telling the truth. Maybe it was the truth as they saw it, and sometimes they delivered it with a left-leaning bias. But they did not deliberately spread lies.

Whatever their faults, the old gatekeepers of real news are gone. They needed a head knocking, and they got it. But what's replaced them presents a challenge, if not a threat, to democracy.

While there is more news to consume, there is no longer a consensus for truth in the news media. The major news organizations are under siege. They've been replaced by an agenda-driven rabble of pseudojournalists on the Web and on cable news networks. There are few outlets anyone can trust to give unbiased information.

The role of the news media as an honest broker is shattered. The American people do not trust mainstream news sources anymore. Instead, they are drawn to sources that tell them what they want to hear.

In the 2004 presidential campaign, Internet bloggers on both sides spread ridiculous lies about the opposing side's candidate. Hateful words and made-up stories filled the partisan websites. Rabid Democrats insisted that Bush and Cheney sent young Americans to their death in Iraq just to make money for Halliburton, the military services company that Cheney once ran. Equally rabid Republicans insisted that Kerry deliberately shot himself in Vietnam to win a war medal.

The ideological zealots who spread such claims blamed media bias on any attempts by legitimate news outlets to debunk unfounded charges against either candidate. Supporters who believed the claims were primed to ignore mainstream reporting, instead putting their faith in baseless rumors spread on the Internet.

I know. I get their e-mail. Writing a campaign column during the 2004 campaign for *Congressional Quarterly*, I got plenty of hate mail from both sides any time I struggled to play referee in the war of words and gossip between Internet bloggers for President George Bush and Democratic nominee John Kerry.

After my column on Kerry's war record, a man in Florida wrote, "Go back to your liberal hole." A Kerry supporter didn't like my comments on television about Bush's skillful handling of relief to Florida hurricane victims. "How dare you get on national television and talk out your ass," she wrote.

I would not pretend that my own e-mail is all that telling, but over the years I have noticed a remarkable increase in the hateful tone of reader responses. As a reporter and columnist since 1985, I have always given readers a way to contact me, and I usually write back. The advent of e-mail made this much easier.

Even if the message to me is full of venomous insults, I try to write a courteous response. Generally, I find that when I respond to a hateful message, an amazing thing happens. The writer backs down. It is almost as if they suddenly realize that they are not corresponding with the headless beast they imagined when originally writing. They discover that a real person with feelings is on the other end.

"Thank you for your polite and kind response," a Kerry supporter in Massachusetts wrote after originally accusing me of being "stupid," "silly," and "drunk" in a column criticizing the Democrat's performance at his national convention. "I still disagree, but I apologize for the shrillness before."

Still, this woman's original attitude represents the way in which a growing number of Americans see the news media—as stupid, silly, or just plain drunk. Maybe we deserve such harsh language, but the coarsening of attitudes toward the news media has broken what should be a natural bond between journalists and citizens.

Bring Back Believable Reporting

Public distrust of the news media is one of the most hazardous political challenges now facing Americans. The need for believable reporting is even more critical in a time of war. A fearful public is more willing to give politicians a free hand to keep secrets, restrict liberties, and send our soldiers to their deaths—all in the name of national security.

The dethronement of news elites divided and conquered a once-powerful force in American life. At the peak of their power in the 1960s, they made a nation in denial see the tragic path our political leaders had led us into during the Vietnam War. A few years later, they toppled a president with the Watergate scandal.

Richard Nixon tried to run against the press. He routinely blamed the media for his problems.

After losing two elections in a row—the 1960 presidential race and his 1962 bid for governor of California—Nixon attacked the media during a stormy news conference.

On November 6, 1962, Nixon suffered a humiliating loss for the California governorship to Democrat Edmund "Pat" Brown. The next morning, he conceded defeat in one of the most bitter speeches of his political career. Blaming a biased press, Nixon announced that he was leaving politics.

Nixon started this press conference proclaiming that he had "no complaints about the press coverage" of the race he had just lost. "I will never complain about it," Nixon said. "I think

that each of you were . . . was . . . writing it as you believed it, and I want that always to be the case in America.”³

But he could not help himself. Nixon clearly believed the press coverage had been biased in favor of his Democratic opponent. He ended the press conference with a rambling diatribe against the media and a kicker line often replayed through the years.

“You don’t have Nixon to kick around anymore,” he told the reporters, “because gentlemen, this is my last press conference.”⁴

Nixon’s comments leading up to that closing line also should be remembered. He bared his true feelings about the media in a way that most politicians—Democrats or Republicans—would do if they let themselves:

“My philosophy with regard to the press has never really gotten through. And I want to get it through. This cannot be said for any other American figure today, I guess. Never in my 16 years of campaigning have I complained to a publisher, to an editor, about the coverage of a reporter. I believe a reporter has got a right to write it as he feels it. I believe that if a reporter believes that one man ought to win rather than the other, whether it’s a television or radio or the like, he ought to say so. I will say to the reporter sometimes that I think, well look, well, look, I wish you’d give my opponent the same going-over that you give me. And as I leave the press, all that I can say is this: For 16 years, ever since the Hiss case, you’ve had a lot of fun. A lot of fun. You’ve had an opportunity to attack me, and I think I’ve given as good as I’ve taken.”⁵

One line in Nixon’s speech especially stands out for me: “I believe that if a reporter believes that one man ought to win rather than the other, whether it’s a television or radio or the like, he ought to say so,” Nixon said.

I agree.

It is time for the news media to rethink what objectivity means. Concealing bias has left the media open to attack. The public, egged on by politicians, do not believe that reporters have no opinions.

Not revealing those opinions provokes politicians and critics to look for clues. Their imaginations run wild.

Would then—Vice President Bush have been able to put Rather on the defensive in their 1988 confrontation if Rather had made it clear he was opposed to Bush’s election that year? Perhaps by clearing the decks on that score, Rather could have kept the interview focused on Bush’s record. The public would have been better served. Instead, they got a juvenile shouting match that illuminated nothing.

Nixon’s frustration was much like Bush’s on the night of his Rather interview. When reporters with a bias appear to be pushing a political agenda in the guise of objective reporting, the politician under attack feels licensed to return fire.

In Nixon’s case, his tortured feelings about the media ultimately brought him down. In 1962, when he said the media “won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore,” he was wrong on both counts.

Around six years later, he was running for president, and the media kicked him mercilessly. He resigned the presidency in August 1974.

Arrogance Is a Blinding Weakness

The moment Nixon resigned was the peak of press power. While many reveled in the moment as an example of the constitutionally protected media doing its job, Nixon’s demise sowed the seeds of the media’s demise.

By the time George H. W. Bush and his brilliant media handlers came along in 1988, the media had become arrogant to a fault.

Many in the top ranks of media organizations were beat reporters during Watergate. Many, like Rather, had played key roles in Nixon's undoing.

And many of them had just spent several years trying to take down Ronald Reagan over the Iran-Contra episode. They were determined to finish the job by preventing Bush's rise to the presidency.

What happened to the media in the years since highlights what the great American historian Charles A. Beard once said, "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power."⁶

Arrogance is a blinding weakness.

For more than a decade after the 1988 campaign, politicians and their friends conducted a full assault on "liberal" media. The Bush family made it a personal crusade. Clinton perfected some of their techniques when faced with coverage of his personal life. A new cable outlet, the Fox News Channel, pursued and found a winning audience of those who believed the media was biased against conservatives.

Bush's 1988 campaign manager, Roger Ailes, took his expertise from that campaign right into the belly of the beast. He launched the Fox News Channel under the rousing banner, "We Report, You Decide." Fox soon dominated cable news, dethroning CNN. Once again, Ailes had the "liberal media" on the run.

All the while, those in charge of major news organizations looked on these developments with unconcerned amusement. Even today, many are still dismissive. But most know they've been had.

ABC News President David Westin spoke for his peers in observing that network news operations lost their way with viewers.

"The audience wants us to come to them, instead of making them come to us, which is traditionally what network news has done," Westin said at a Stanford University panel of network news chiefs after the 2004 presidential election.⁷

CBS News President Andrew Heyward agreed and tried to make the best of it.

"It's very different from the comfortable oligopoly that prevailed at the beginning of broadcast news, where you had networks with enormous market share," Heyward said. "I think that's to the public benefit. It puts more pressure on us to be excellent."⁸

The numbers tell the story.

The Gallup polling organization routinely monitors public faith in media as an institution. Not surprisingly, public support peaked during Watergate. In those days, more than 70 percent of the public trusted the media. Today, that number hovers around 50 percent.⁹

Media Wimps

The wimp factor is the most disturbing consequence of this trend. Today, reporters are less eager to stand up to power.

When real questions emerged about balloting problems in the 2004 presidential election, the mainstream news media took a pass. Few wanted to appear to be questioning the legitimacy of George W. Bush's reelection, especially after the debacle of the 2000 recount in Florida.

But the story was worth pursuing. Not because the election was stolen. It wasn't. The story was worth reporting because it showed how elections could be stolen.

In Ohio, for example, one county barred the press from the room where votes were counted. Electronic balloting machines around the country malfunctioned in mysterious ways. Internet bloggers had the story largely to themselves, which only muddied the waters. There was little reliably accurate reporting on it in the days right after the election.

Television host Keith Olbermann almost stood alone for weeks in his dogged reporting of the Ohio voting debate. Night after night on his MSNBC show, the broadcaster kept a tight focus on the story. Conservative pundits like Ann Coulter blasted him for it. He was accused of trying to overturn the election.

But the Ohio story was worth pursuing. There were lawsuits, voting recounts, congressional hearings, the works. Yet most of the news media barely touched it.

Olbermann wrote a daily online blog of his own chronicling his work on the story. He neatly explained his point in following the saga.

“Logic must suggest to the more sober of the Republicans that this needs to be addressed now,” Olbermann wrote. He warned of the “potential for long-term damage that continuing a stonewall can wreak.”¹⁰

Still, Olbermann’s efforts to examine an important story put him at the top of the hate list in Republican and conservative circles.

Coulter devoted a column on her website to trashing what she called “Olbermann’s idiotic conspiracy theory.”

The Ohio voting problems turned out to be far more than conspiracy theories. Yet most of the mainstream media wimped out on this story largely because the Democrats did not immediately challenge the election. The coverage only stepped up once the Green Party and Libertarian Party exercised their rights under state law to request a recount of Ohio ballots.

This is a trend. Too often the media waits for the partisans in a dispute to carry a story forward. The news media seldom takes the lead or sticks with it when powerful politicians might be offended. They prefer to hide behind the charges of political opponents.

Standing Up to Power

Today’s media is as bullied as ever. Politicians don’t have to dodge the tough questions anymore. They seldom even get them. Right or wrong, it is important and healthy for our politicians to be tested.

Before the Iraq War in 2003, most reporters in the White House press corps seldom challenged the president. A standout exception is longtime reporter Helen Thomas, who embodied the purpose—and the peril—of a free press in testy exchanges with President Bush and his advisers during televised press conferences. At the time, *Vanity Fair* magazine dubbed Thomas the “outlaw granny” of the press corps.¹¹ Even war supporters should have wanted answers to the questions she asked.

Only the free press can make politicians accountable. The founders of our nation understood this. They lived under an oppressive regime that jailed those who printed what it didn’t want people to know. That is why they wrote a constitution that ranks freedom of the press in the top tier of rights for our democracy.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”—First Amendment, Bill of Rights, U.S. Constitution.⁹

Those who helped write the First Amendment deeply believed that freedom of the press was nonnegotiable.

“The liberty of the press is indeed a blessing, which ought not to be surrendered but with blood,” wrote Edmund Randolph in a letter to James Madison in 1789.¹²

Without a free press, there is no freedom. Politicians everywhere—and throughout history—want to control the press and thereby control what the public knows about their deeds.

Thanks to the world’s most protective constitution, the press in America is technically as free as it gets.

But politicians have found a way to limit the public benefits of our free press. They turned Americans against the news media, aided and abetted by the arrogance of elites in the news business who didn’t know what hit them.

While network bosses and editors at major newspapers looked the other way, thinking their power was untouchable, politicians joined forces with talk radio giants like Rush Limbaugh. Together, they provoked millions of Americans to see the mainstream media as an enemy of their culture and values.

News chiefs made it easy for the politicians to bring them down. Many harbor an elitist view of Main Street America. Bad behavior and bias exists. But rooting out pervasive elitism and lousy journalism is not the only motivation for many of the politicians who target the press.

The truth threatens many politicians. They try to control what we think is true. They define truth on their own terms, which often is not the truth at all. As President Bill Clinton once famously said, “It depends on what the meaning of *is* is.”

By undermining the credibility of the news media, politicians get the upper hand in defining what “is.” Far from targeting only bad actors, these politicians seek to undermine our best journalists in hopes of muzzling the truth.

It is time for more Americans to appreciate a truly free and genuinely fair media and to demand more of it. Most reporters are trying to realize the promise of a free press: to bring you more truth than the politicians do.

Beware politicians and their friends who tell you to ignore the media. They might be hoping to make you believe their own lies.

Journalists are easy political targets because we seldom defend ourselves. We are trained to avoid making ourselves the story. We are supposed to cover the news makers and keep our own personalities and opinions out of the story. When politicians make us the story, we aren’t sure how to handle it.

That is why CBS News executives mostly kept silent in 1988 after then–Vice President Bush attacked their anchor on the air. Network employees who had been with Bush in his office during the explosive interview implored their bosses respond more forcefully.

Some at CBS felt it was worth noting in public that Bush launched his attack on Dan Rather from a cue card held up by his campaign manager. Veteran news personnel in the room had never seen such a thing. It made Bush’s outburst seem orchestrated. Had that been publicized, Rather might not have been so widely criticized as the villain in this episode.

But CBS chose to issue a single written statement asserting that the Bush campaign had plenty of notice that Iran-Contra would be a topic in the interview. As a result, Bush and his supporters enjoyed the fruits of a one-way debate, relentlessly hammering CBS for “setting up” the vice president.

Instead of defending ourselves against attacks from politicians, the news media reports the attacks to viewers, readers and listeners who naturally believe the criticism because they

seldom get the other side. How could the public avoid believing criticism that is objectively delivered without complaint from those being attacked?

The result is a level of public distrust that goes well beyond where it should be. The bias that exists in today's journalism does not justify the public's cynicism. The politicians who "run against the media" provide the extra measure of media bashing that inflames public anger.

The news media earned a whipping, for sure. Disingenuous and superficial news coverage is everywhere—on television, on radio, and even in the best newspapers. Biased, sometimes fraudulent reporting is not the rare exception it should be.

But on its worst days, a free and fair press is our only real chance at getting the truth.

The news media exists to try to tell you what "is" really "is." Politicians often try to define it as something that is far from the real truth.

Perhaps like no time in our history, today's politicians have the advantage in defining truth.

Armies of press aides, pseudojournalists and well-funded advocacy groups, are in place as an alternative to the traditional news media. The great irony is that the rise of this propaganda machine feeds on the belief that the news media is biased. Yet often there is no one more biased than those who hurl the charge.

If the press is not believed largely because politicians and their allies turned Americans against it, then the press is not free but under the thumb of politicians. And without a free press, there is no democracy.