

Media, Democracy and the Power to Misinform

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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Since 1976 Project Censored, the California-based media monitoring group that honors independent journalism, has been tracking important stories that are downplayed. In 2000, for example, some of the underreported news that made their Top Ten list included: how pharmaceutical companies put profits before health needs (still true), the destruction of Kurdish villages with US weapons (the targets then were in Afghanistan and Pakistan), environmental racism in Louisiana (five years before Katrina), and US plans to militarize space in defiance of international law (ignored for decades).

Despite the success of “alternative” outlets in breaking news that “mainstream” media ignore, nagging questions remain. Peter Arnett, a former CNN reporter honored that year for an article on reduced foreign media coverage, put it this way: “We’ve had what might constitute new revelations today. But even if the alternative press as a whole took on these stories, would it be enough?”

It is a disquieting question that could be extended to progressive movements in general. If various coalitions and alliances joined forces to challenge corporate capitalism, would it be enough to usher in “real change?”

In the past, modern attempts to control concentrated wealth and widen democratic participation have met with limited success. During the early 20th Century, reforms addressed workers’ rights, monopoly excesses, political corruption, uncontrolled development, and the devastating impacts of the early industrial era. But most of those efforts also quelled popular discontent rather than producing fundamental change, and the reforms were often co-opted or diluted by business interests to serve their long-range needs. Rather than leading the country toward some type of social transformation, progressive reform may have helped head it off.

One of the underlying conundrums is how to make powerful institutions accountable – and to whom. The prevailing logic is that fundamental change involves, at the very least, stronger government intervention. But if the goal is to control mega-corporations that transcend national boundaries, competing with some national governments and dominating others, even national level reform won’t do the job. We obviously don’t want corporate-dominated institutions running the world.

But what’s the alternative? Will job creation, stronger enforcement and more accountability be sufficient, or does the current international order need to be completely overhauled and replaced? And if so, replaced with what?

The United Nations could be stronger, but this Cold War creation was flawed from the start, and has been marginalized and manipulated for more than half a century. The times cry out for radical ideas, something like a global parliament, which is somehow linked to communities. This sounds utopian - or frightening, depending on your level of paranoia. But if the Corporate World Order inflicts much more damage it may begin to look attractive. And if social and economic justice is the driving force of progressive politics, how far is it to an agenda that directly challenges market control and links the global with the local? After all, we already have a slogan - "Think Globally, Act Locally."

The bottom line is that there is no sure-fire formula for effective democracy. Even if there was, most people are no longer very optimistic, or even hopeful about where the world is heading, to put their faith in grand plans. If some group or individual did put forth a compelling "big idea" and manage to jump start a movement, there would certainly be more than enough self-righteous purism and cynical reaction to sow doubts.

In the so-called modern era, things basically made sense. Despite setbacks, technical dangers and brutal dictators most people believed in the possibility of a better future, changing the world that was changing us. But we currently live in a post-modern world. And although that need not be a negative label, it does tend to emphasize uncertainty, spectacle, even the chaotic.

The term "post-modern" first came into use after World War II, referring to literature and art that took modern forms to their extremes. Since then, it has evolved into a general attitude toward society. Characterized by skepticism, it forces "authorities" and "their" institutions to defend themselves against charges that they are no longer relevant - or are just plain ignorant. On the plus side, that attitude helped bring down the Berlin Wall and sometimes puts experts and leaders in the hot seat. However, it also tends to challenge any strongly held belief.

Self-conscious and often self-contradictory, post-modernists tend to believe that truth is merely a perspective and nothing should be taken too seriously. The characteristic expression is irony, emphasizing the doubleness in whatever is expressed. A favorite grammatical device is quotation marks, reinforcing the idea that the words don't mean what they seem. This expresses the defensive cultural logic of late-capitalism, and plays well into the schemes of media and political demagogues.

Faced with machines that have made life more complicated, a vast amount of unsettling information, and an overwhelming variety of "choices," it is hardly surprising that people, especially the young, are no longer very impressed with much of anything. Their favorite books often revel in this sensibility and abandon the grand narrative approach once standard in novels. Although most films continue to rely on the old linear formula - the hero overcoming obstacles to reach an obvious goal - few people actually believe in that scenario. Real life is so much more ambiguous and complex.

At its extreme such an awareness can lead to disillusionment, nihilism, and a disabling narcissism that favors fads and power over ethics and any ideology. These days narcissism no longer applies solely to "beautiful people" who can relate only to their own images. Narcissists may also be pseudo-intellectuals, calculating promoters, or self-absorbed rebels. Even more unsettling, they are ideally suited for success and power - callous and superficial climbers all too willing to sell themselves.

In post-modern society, self-promotion is the ultimate form of work. It's a state of affairs that can catapult celebrity-politicians like Sarah Palin into power.

In post-modern society the electronic media promote both chronic tension and cynical detachment. Most advertising suggests that appearances are what matter, while many of the programs reinforce ironic distance, often winking that it's just a put-on. And the news? An endless stream on largely ephemeral "facts."

What about truth? That's the last thing we expect.

The technology of journalism has advanced more in the last decade than in the 100 years before. Yet more and more, print, electronic and digital media fill airtime and space with advertorials and questionable news - some of it fake - produced by public relations firms and even governments. The race for higher circulation and audience shares has placed a premium on titillation and superficiality, producing an ill-informed electorate.

Journalistic professionalism and credibility are in free fall. Compounding the problem, corporate ownership and bottom line thinking mean that fewer responsible and trained journalists are available, especially to cover developments in foreign countries. US television networks employ at least a third fewer correspondents than they did 20 years ago. Radio newsroom staffs shrank by 44 percent between 1994 and 2001, and foreign coverage by broadcast and cable networks has declined at least 70 percent since the 1980s.

Print newsroom staffs have also been slashed, unions have been forced to accept cuts, and coverage has been dumbed down. More than 50,000 news industry employees, most of them newspaper journalists, lost their jobs in the first decade of the 21st Century. The result is that major stories go untold, and many communities are being ignored. Sad to say, but professionalism in reporting may be going the way of shortwave radios, fax machines, and the single-lens reflex camera.

The uncomfortable truth is that there is no Constitutional guarantee that democracy will be fair, that people will be well or truthfully informed, or that the press will be competent.

Society is experiencing what has been called a crisis of fact, leaving people with little to trust or believe. As a result, more and more they consume only information that reinforces their opinions. And many journalists aren't helping. The first law of the profession today, Alex Cockburn once wrote, is "to confirm existing prejudice, rather than contradict it."

Thus far, the post-modern age has been characterized largely by fraud and scandal - questionable elections, corrupt leaders, fabricated accounting that devastates the savings of thousands, doped-up athletes, and plagiarized or phony news. Even scholars have been caught plagiarizing parts of their books. It's become so common that a peer-reviewed academic journal, *Plagiarism: Cross Disciplinary Studies in Plagiarism, Fabrication, and Falsification*, was launched in 2007. A subsequent investigation of whether student term papers had been faked found that at least 30 percent of the papers submitted online had been plagiarized, at least in part.

Another troubling development is "photo illustration," frequently involving fabrication of images using digital tools. It sounds like harmless fun, but given the power of images it has the potential to warp public perception in the service of biased or inaccurate stories.

Local TV stations, once the primary source of news about civic life, cover less political news. A survey of the 2006 election season by the University of Wisconsin concluded that “local television news viewers got considerably more information about campaigns from paid political advertisements than from actual news coverage.”

And how do the young get their news? The truth is the many don't bother, and those who do want to know don't use print newspapers, or even radio and TV. They use handheld devices to scan online sources – many operated by think tanks and special interest groups that have figured out how to appeal to a mass audience by mixing commentary with “breaking news,” analysis, and research. According to the blog search engine Technorati, at least 120,000 web logs are created every day, and the total number is in the hundreds of millions.

The emergence of “citizen journalism” and “new media” has led to the notion that professional journalists are no longer as necessary. The idea is that everyone can be a journalist; this will promote a conversation among equals as citizen journalists assemble, edit and even create their own news; the more options we have – and the less control traditional media have over what is relevant – the better offer we will be.

But this presumes that professionalism no longer matters, and standards aren't that important. The “new media” acknowledge few rules. On the other hand, professional journalism isn't so simple. For example, knowing the difference between news, opinion and commentary is a challenge. Serious journalists work hard to develop skills like how to conduct fair and constructive interviews, how to find relevant and complete – not merely convenient – information, how to see various aspects of an issue, and how to convey what they find out clearly, efficiently and accurately. Without such skills, the public is vulnerable to distortions, biased reports, and blatant falsehoods.

According to a State of the News Media report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, only five percent of blog postings include “what would be considered journalistic reporting.” And the origins of most blog stories can be traced back to newspapers. Who will do the reporting if they fade away?

For all its benefits, the “blogosphere” is also accelerating social fragmentation. Many blogs and Websites attract only like-minded people, creating a self-segregated news and information environment that serves the interests of extremists. It's not so different from the partisanship that characterized the press in the early 19th Century. Truth and facts are becoming debatable notions.

Conflict drives the news cycle, with tabloids and obsessive bloggers often shaping the narrative. This makes it far more difficult for people to reach agreement or even have a discussion, and easier for opportunists to ignore or distort reality for the sake of pushing initiatives based on convenience or special interests.

The result has been a loss of faith in almost everything, and an escapist mentality rooted in the belief that no meaningful change is possible. Popular culture feeds on this attitude, encouraging excess and striking poses while confusing commitment with fanaticism.

Still, the situation isn't all bad. Along with skepticism comes a re-awakened concern about the human condition and the planet's health. The idea that “rational planning” provides all the answers is no longer convincing, gone with notions such as “bigger is better” and nature is merely a resource to be conquered and exploited.

In economics, the rigid approach to production known as Fordism, named for the man who brought us the assembly line and mass production using interchangeable parts, has given way to a more flexible, eclectic system emphasizing innovation and a post-industrial compression of time and space. The view that corporations and the global economy are only parts of a whole planetary system is slowly gaining traction. As with most post-modern developments, however, there is a double edge. Re-engineering economics and work could lead to more worker-owned businesses, a renewed sense of community and environmental responsibility, and a groundswell against corporation domination. But it may simultaneously increase instability, turning even more people into contingent workers.

Commenting on the implications, former presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy once argued that post-modernism favors “fuzzy logic” and subjective impressions over rational arguments and clear thinking. It recognizes no absolutes, just degrees and disposable attitudes. “This predicament is not altogether reassuring,” he concluded, “as it may lead us to a state of ‘entropy,’ i.e., of randomness, chaos and disorder, with little basis for optimism as to what may result.”

Despite recent progress – from democratic uprisings to increased tolerance – one possibility remains a right-wing cultural counterrevolution. Speaking on his TV network years ago, Pat Robertson made the goal perfectly clear: “to mobilize Christians, one precinct at a time, one community at a time, one state at a time, until once again we are the head and not the tail, and at the top rather than at the bottom of our political system.”

In a country founded on the principle of church-state separation, this may sound unlikely. Yet TV huckster Glenn Beck, political “celebrity” Palin and many others clearly share this “dream.” We shouldn’t be surprised that such opportunists seize any chance to distort public debate and promote themselves as prophets. Christian right evangelists have been doing it for generations. Not much has changed since the time of Aimee Semple McPherson and Father Coughlin except the targets. For Beck, Palin, Rush Limbaugh and their ilk it’s everything associated with progressivism and social justice.

To call them televangelists – or propagandists – isn’t a stretch. Backed by Fox and conservatives like the Koch brothers, since 2008 they have attempted to mass market an extreme, religiously-infused ideology and immerse viewers in a false reality. Specious arguments are presented as history, biblical truth or scientific fact. Too often mainstream media legitimize their misinformation.

The religious right has helped to create a distorted picture of contemporary reality that many people, insecure and hungry for guidance, continue to embrace. As former Christian Coalition director Ralph Reed explained before the election of George W. Bush, the short-term objective is to force candidates to endorse the religious right’s agenda, an effort that has too frequently proven successful. But the ultimate step is to turn that agenda into national policy.

In contrast, progressives tend to put their faith in exposure. When more people understand the extreme and illogical views of the Christian Right, goes the argument, their candidates will be rejected. There is support for this view. But too many people, uncertain about their futures and the safety of their families and friends, remain vulnerable to the politics of paranoia and blame.

From time to time, Beck and others have pointed to a secret conspiracy, supposedly bent on

subjugating the nation to some form of mutated socialism or fascism. The idea that Barack Obama is a Muslim socialist fits well within this overarching theory. This also harks back to the sermons of McPherson and Coughlin. It may sound laughable, but in a time of distrust and decadence, when many voters believe their institutions don't work and their leaders often look like greedy crooks, it isn't that hard to embrace such a prophecy.

Bombarded with disinformation people have often turned to hucksters who offer simplistic answers and the faint hope of a moral revival. Although other religious traditions offer more constructive answers - tolerance, equality, harmony with nature, and social justice, among others - their spokesmen don't often reach so large an audience, a state of affairs that could change with Pope Francis.

Repeating lies and distortions, while often effective in the short-term, does not make them true. Eventually, more people will have to face the contradiction of a movement that poses as patriotic and "pro-family" and the destructive divisions it actually promotes. There is still hope that the hypocrisy of opportunists can be exposed for what it is - false prophecy that no amount of repetition can conceal.

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