

The Media in America: Selling Views, Calling it News

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Global Research, January 14, 2011

14 January 2011

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

America's journalists are not "newshounds." They are nothing more than salesclerks, hocking the products their employers want to sell. The pretty faces that now function as most television news anchors are no different than the pretty models used to sell other products. The American "free" press is comprised of nothing more than a number of retail outlets which sell stories slanted to please their target audiences. As such, they exist merely to sell snake oil.

Sometime in the 1960s, I took part in a university symposium along with three other faculty members—a political scientist, a historian, and a journalism professor. The topic was *Freedom of the Press—Good or Bad*.

During the sixties, the Cold War was being fought mightily. The Soviet Union's news agencies, TASS and Pravda, were continually attacked by the American "free press" as untrustworthy. A common claim was that a controlled press could never be trusted while a free press could, and my three colleagues on the panel supported that view. I did too, but only partially.

A controlled press, I argued, most certainly could not be trusted when reporting on governmental actions or policies, but I pointed out that much news is not affected by government, and I saw no reason to be suspicious of a controlled press' reporting on such matters. But I also argued that there was good reason to distrust the so called free press no matter what was being reported.

My argument rested upon the observation that a controlled press, being funded by its controlling government, had no need to attract readers while the so called free press had to rely on readers to remain economically viable. The free press had to market its wares in the same way that any retail company must, and one way to do that was to slant the news in ways that made it attractive to the news organization's target groups which, in a sense, biased all the stories the free press reported. And although the free press claimed to maintain objectivity by balancing the presentation, using two people of divergent political views, I pointed out that it was easy to select the two people in ways that made it seem that one side always prevails, the result being that the media divided itself into ideological groups, not even to mention that large segment of the press openly termed sensational-tabloid.

Although this symposium took place approximately half a century ago, my argument is easier to make today than it was then. The media in America today often openly declare their various points of view, from conservative Fox News to liberal MSNBC.

Distinguished from these "all news" outlets are the more traditional networks, ABC, CBS,

and NBC. These can be likened to department stores, in which various products are sold throughout each day, so called news being only one of them. These networks have their departments—the game show department, the reality show department, the sports department, the business department, the celebrity department, and, of course, the “news” department.

What either type of medium does, however, is similar. Just as Macy’s sells products of various kinds, the news sells stories, and each outlet distinguishes itself from the others by the slant in which each frames their products. Just as McDonalds distinguishes its burgers from those sold by BurgerKing, ABC distinguishes its stories from those told by NBC. In short, in the free press, the news is sold by slanting it in ways that make it appealing to the target audiences, and the slanting often takes up more time than telling the story does. An anchor often tells a story and then so called experts are used to embellish it by providing the slant. Unfortunately, the “experts” used often know nothing more about the issues discussed than the average viewer/listener does. The news, which many believe should consist of facts, becomes mere opinion.

Everyone must remember that there is no Hippocratic Oath for journalists; a person does not have to swear to report events truthfully to be a journalist. In fact, less is required of a journalist than of the plumber you call to unstop your toilet. In short, today’s American journalist can be likened to the teenager on roller skates who brings the hot dog you ordered to your car at Sonic or the clerk behind the counter at Macy’s. So anyone who criticizes the mainstream press for not being truthful, neutral, or objective is misguided. That’s not what the mainstream press sells and criticizing it is as unreasonable as criticizing McDonalds for not selling lamb chops.

That the media need to differentiate products from those of competitors also limits the kinds of stories that can be reported. If adding a bias to a story is difficult because of the story’s nature, the “free” press tends to ignore it. For instance, when the Iranian opposition engaged in anti-governmental demonstrations after the last election, the American press made much of it because the story could easily be presented as an oppressive government’s suppression of dissent. But the demonstrations against austerity policies taking place in Iceland, Ireland, Great Britain, France, and Greece have gone unreported because those demonstrations cannot be presented as demonstrations against oppressive governments. Similarly, the killing of Christians in Iraq and Egypt have gone unreported because they cannot be slanted to make them seem justified. If slanted any other way, they would provide anti-war Americans with another reason to argue against the wars. Furthermore, it is difficult to sensationalize stories about foreigners Americans know nothing of. So, for instance, stories about the antics of Italy’s Berlusconi would have little attraction to American viewers/listeners. Ever since it joined Mrs. Merkel’s German government, the fortunes of the pro-business Free Democrats have been dramatically changed from a party that won 15 percent during the federal elections of September 2009 to below 5 percent today, because of an increasing negative attitude of Germans for business since the current economic collapse began, a story that cannot easily be told to Americans because of American pro-business attitudes.

Snardfarker.ning.com claims that there are five reasons that the mainstream media is worthless. (1) Self-Censorship by journalists who are afraid to do what journalists were put on this green earth to do. “There’s the intense pressure to maintain access to insider sources. . . . There’s the fear of being labeled partisan if one’s bullshit-calling isn’t meted

out in precisely equal increments along the political spectrum.” (2) Censorship by higher-ups. “If journalists do want to speak out about an issue, they also are subject to tremendous pressure by their editors or producers to kill the story.” (3) To drum support for war. “Why has the American press consistently served the elites in disseminating their false justifications for war? One of the reasons is because the large media companies are owned by those who support the militarist agenda or even directly profit from war and terror (for example, NBC . . . was owned by General Electric, one of the largest defense contractors in the world — which directly profits from war, terrorism and chaos).” (4) Access. “For \$25,000 to \$250,000, The Washington Post . . . offered lobbyists and association executives off-the-record, nonconfrontational access to ‘those powerful few’ Obama administration officials, members of Congress, and — at first — even the paper’s own reporters and editors.” And (5) Censorship by the Government. “the government has exerted tremendous pressure on the media to report things a certain way. Indeed, at times the government has thrown media owners and reporters in jail if they’ve been too critical.” These reasons are true to some extent, but the ultimate reason is merely the need to grow the bottom line, to make money which is, after all, the reason the media exists in America.

The consequence of all of this is that Americans have become mentally isolated. The world beyond America’s borders is an amorphous, unknown land. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has recently said, “most Americans are close to total ignorance about the world. They are ignorant.” What people don’t realize is how much of this ignorance is the result of the American “free” press’ need to slant its reporting. Brzezinski finds this “unhealthy,” and he is right, since America’s “foreign policy has to be endorsed by the people if it is to be pursued.” And this ignorance makes it easy for the government to convince the people that some disastrous policy is appropriate.

Americans who are critical of the mainstream press have an idealized notion of what the press is. They indict the press for not being what the press *should be* but is not and never has been. The press’ need to sell its products makes it impossible to be what it should be.

Unfortunately, the alternative press has adopted many of the mainstream press’ models. There are sites devoted exclusively to ideological stories—conservative, liberal, libertarian, pro and anti war, global warming, carbon taxation, and more—all in an attempt to attract readers. So the truth doesn’t emerge there either. How then can we find it?

There was once a small segment of the “free” press called investigative journalism which has now become almost entirely extinct. Perhaps this has happened because of the difficulty of prying information out of governmental agencies and corporate entities. About the only way to get that hidden information is to have it leaked by some whistleblower to some site that can protect the anonymity of the leaker. WikiLeaks is a start, but many such sites are needed if all the lies and disinformation is to be revealed. And, yes, it is likely that governments and even corporations will create pseudo-leaking sites to try to obfuscate the truth revealed by any leaker. But if the sites can, as WikiLeaks does, disseminate actual source documents that any reader can judge the authenticity of for her/himself, much more of the truth will emerge than can emerge now.

Slanted journalism must, of course, be debunked. Many alternative journalists already do this quite well, but sites like WikiLeaks are also necessary to combat the increasing secrecy that even the “free” press must contend with. Slanted reporting must be debunked, and leaking and whistleblowing must be encouraged and protected if the truth is ever to get a change of emerging from the darkness of insidious secrecy.

America's journalists are not "newshounds." Although I suspect that each and every one of them will consider this an insult, they are nothing more than salesclerks, hocking the products their employers want to sell. The pretty faces—well at least not ugly—that now function as most news anchors are no different than the pretty models used to sell other products. The American "free" press is comprised of nothing more than a number of retail outlets which sell stories slanted to please their target audiences. As such, they exist merely to sell snake oil.

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