

The Olbermann Expulsion: The Man, The Media, The Back Story

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"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves, that we are underlings." Julius Caesar (I, ii, 140-141). Cassius, a nobleman, is speaking...

Alex Gibney's new film "The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer" shows how the former Governor's indictments and criticisms of many Wall Street firm's led to counter attacks and pushback from powerful people. It shows how he became targeted and exposes the role of the FBI, the Bush appointed US Attorney, rich players on Wall Street, corrupt politicians in Albany, a professional former Nixon boosting political provocateur/hit-man and Rupert Murdoch's New York Post. They all went after him with a vengeance. He was, in fact, outed by the dirty tricksters.

In the end, though, Spitzer blamed himself for his own ego, arrogance and hubris. He says he brought himself down.

There is no doubt that Keith Olbermann had many pols and powercrats gunning for him for his outspoken commentaries and political impact. He is a partisan, yes, but also a commentator who takes wacks at his own party. He pointed to the deep biases and superficiality in TV News. But then, he violated a firm rule governing TV journalists barring political donations to people they are covering. He apparently flouted his own contract although I am sure there is ambiguity there

In doing so, Keith put himself at risk and opened the door to being suspended.

A few years ago I wrote a magazine profile on Olbermann (who NBC blocked me from speaking to.) It does show his history of confronting broadcasters and bosses. I admire his work, even as I find it sometimes pedantic and predictable, He knew, or should have known, that he would be outed for a blatant transgression, and that does not excuse the others who do it, including his company and competitors.

(I do not make partisan political donations for this very reason, (as well as my disgust for most politicians) but I also do not disguise my viewpoints with the blather of phony "objectivity.")

Yes, I would like to see him back on the air.

Is there hypocrisy here? Of course! That goes without saying. TV is a minefield, and to survive, you need an internal radar and realization that perception often trumps reality. You need relationships with colleagues and managers too, or you can isolate yourself. Who had his back? Did he believe his own hype?

MY PROFILE OF KEITH OLBERMANN IN 2007 (NBC would not let me speak to him)
<http://www.larryflynt.com/mycms/index.php?mact=News,cntnt01,detail,0&cntnt01articleid=63&cntnt01returnid=15>

The most upsetting thing about watching Good Night, and Good Luck—George Clooney’s cinematic tribute to media legend Edward R. Murrow—was realizing there aren’t any journalists of his stature in the hyper-commercialized, dumbed-down “wasteland” of contemporary network TV news. An intrepid war correspondent and broadcaster, Murrow dared expose tyrannical Senator Joseph McCarthy on CBS in the 1950s. Who among today’s blow-dried anchors and reporters would have had the cajones to take on blustering blowhard McCarthy?

In the wake of Clooney’s 2005 biopic, one candidate has emerged from the media pack to reinvigorate the fourth estate. “Keith Olberman is, quite simply, the Edward R. Murrow of our time,” asserts liberal radio host Stephanie Miller, whose program has been heard on Sirius Satellite Radio and other broadcast outlets.

The sportscaster-turned-political analyst anchors MSNBC’s evening newscast, Countdown With Keith Olberman. If you haven’t been paying attention to his rising influence and popularity, you may be alone—Countdown’s viewership rose 21% in a year, and the perpetually third-place cable-news network edged out its CNN competitor during Olberman’s time slot. Countdown is MSNBC’s highest-rated program.

Olberman has always stood out, and not just because he stands 6-3 and wears size 13 shoes. Born in New York City in 1959, he was a gifted child who, at age 14, wrote the book *The Major League Coaches: 1921-1973* (published by Card Memorabilia Associates). He was also a play-by-play announcer for his high school’s hockey team on WHTR. Chris Berman, now an ESPN mainstay, was the station’s sports director.

Keith entered Cornell University at age 16, and while an undergraduate, covered sports for WVBR, a student-run radio station. Graduating at 20, Olberman paid his dues on local news at Boston and Los Angeles TV stations before landing a berth at ESPN. He won awards for a witty and distinctive reportorial style that was also criticized for having “too much backbone.” It was literally true because the oversized Olberman has six lumbar vertebrae, while the rest of us have only five. He refers to himself as a “spinal mutant,” quipping, “I do have too much backbone.”

Olberman has had to overcome some physical problems, including celiac disease, which requires a gluten-free diet. In 1980 he hit his head on a New York City subway door and lost depth perception. Olberman also has had some problems containing his emotions. When Keith left ESPN in June 1997, colleague Mike Soltys said, “He didn’t burn bridges here. He napalmed them.” One issue was an appearance on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* that ESPN did not authorize.

On November 17, 2002, Olberman published what he called a “*mea culpa*” on Salon.com, in which he mused about his motivations, emotional vulnerability and willingness to talk about doubts and concerns most public figures avoid.

“It feels as if I’ve been coming out of a huge fog bank,” Olberman wrote, acknowledging there had been problems and screwups on his show. “On top of everything else about it that can destabilize the soul, television is fraught with a million commonplace things that can go

wrong.

“I have lived much of my life assuming much of the responsibility around me and developing a dread of being blamed for things going wrong,” Keith candidly confessed. “Moreover, deep down inside I’ve always believed that everybody around me was qualified and competent, and I wasn’t, and that someday I’d be found out. If you think that way, when somebody messes up, you can’t imagine that it just ‘happened.’ Since they’re so much better than you are, how could they not complete a task successfully? They have to be not trying hard enough—and when they don’t try and the show goes to hell, who gets blamed? You do.”

Olbermann’s backbone surfaced again when MSNBC hired him to cover politics. He quickly discovered he couldn’t stand cable’s marathon-like obsession with repetitive Monica Lewinsky news-a-thons. On January 21, 1998, MSNBC reoriented Olbermann’s program, *The Big Show*, to focus on “what we euphemistically call ‘The Clinton-Lewinsky investigations,’” Keith said.

The story began to get to him. He later explained why at the Cornell University commencement address that June: “Virtually every night, for an hour, sometimes two, I have presided over discussions about this stuff, so intricate, so repetitive, that it has assumed the characteristics of the medieval religious scholars arguing for months and even years over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

“Then my network starts covering this story 28 hours out of every 24.” He confessed it led him to “having dry heaves in the bathroom” and “days...when my line of work makes me ashamed, makes me depressed, makes me want to cry.” Later that spring, “I awakened from my stupor and told my employers that I simply could not continue doing this.” He then urged the graduates to do the right thing.

After 17 months at MSNBC, Olbermann returned to sports, this time at Fox, for another short stint as anchor. He went freelance, turning up on CNN, then radio, also writing for Salon.com, until bouncing back to MSNBC.

Olbermann really took off after he debuted his current MSNBC show, *Countdown*, on March 31, 2003. The program originates at MSNBC’s Secaucus, New Jersey, headquarters. One of its most-talked-about segments, called “Oddball,” features wacky footage from around the world illustrating Keith’s eclectic interests and idiosyncratic passions. (An oddball fact about Caucasian Keith is that he’s related by marriage to boxer Mike Tyson. The niece of Tyson’s adoptive father, longtime trainer Gus D’Amato, married Olbermann’s father’s brother, making Keith—who is single and childless—a Tyson cousin. How appropriate—considering his initials are K.O.)

Playgirl magazine voted Olbermann its number one sexiest male newscaster in 2004. GQ recently branded him a “renegade” and named him one of the publication’s “Men of the Year.” Keith has also won an Edward R. Murrow Award for reporting, which may explain why he signs off *Countdown* with Murrow’s signature farewell, “Good night, and good luck.” The CBS broadcaster, renowned for speaking truth to power, is Olbermann’s role model.

The MSNBC anchorman took on his Fox competition directly and personally by skewering its “reportage,” repeatedly labeling Fox bullyboy Bill O’Reilly “The Worst Person in the World.” Last summer, Olbermann wore an O’Reilly mask to a meeting of TV critics, giving them the Nazi “Sieg Heil” salute. The demagogic O’Reilly blasted back, cutting off callers to his radio

program for using the K or O words. He even sicced Fox security on one caller who managed to bleat out the offending name.

After Olbermann started detailing the charges lodged by a former producer in a sexual harassment suit against The O'Reilly Factor's führer, the New York Post—which, like Fox, is owned by conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch and his News Corp—reported on accusations posted to a gossip Web site that Olbermann was a lousy lover. The feud soon deteriorated into a very personal tit-for-tat.

Olbermann moved from taking on people like O'Reilly to frontally challenging the Bush regime, and then Dubya himself. For the first time, left-leaning and Democratic viewers had a voice that resonated with them in a medium dominated by right-wing pundits and opinion makers.

His "special comments" segment, centering on pressing issues, spontaneously began after Hurricane Katrina so that Olbermann could express his outrage at the federal government's disastrous bungling. The special comments—the best soliloquies since Hamlet—are spread virally on sites like YouTube and Google and linked throughout the blogosphere. Keith used his own "Bloggerman" blog to make sure his words could be read as well as heard.

Suddenly, Olbermann's ratings rocketed, as did his status as a fearless and articulate force in media. When Keith teamed up with Hardball's Chris Matthews to cover the 2006 midterm elections, MSNBC doubled the size of the audience that had watched it during 2002's midterms. Overall, MSNBC's viewership rose from 15% of the cable news audience in 2002 to 25% in 2006. Meanwhile, the ratings of MSNBC's competitors have declined.

TV critics such as the Washington Post's/CNN's Howard Kurtz credit Olbermann with helping to swing the 2006 election to the Democrats.

"Keith is a powerhouse—a pundit/journalist with brains and guts, and a fundamental sense of decency," adds Mark Crispin Miller, an NYU media professor and author. "I think it's telling that his background is not news but sports, because the U.S. news establishment would never have produced a voice so brave and honest."

What audiences seem to like most is that Keith does not genuflect or pull punches vis-à-vis the powers-that-be. He goes right for the jugular; no other contemporary newsman would chastise the commander in chief with impertinent words like: "The President of the United States owes this country an apology. It will not be offered, of course. He does not realize its necessity. There are now none around him who would tell him or could. There needs to be an apology from the President. ... And more than one."

Olbermann went further in responding to Donald Rumsfeld, when he compared his critics to appeasers of Nazis. Keith denounced the then-Defense Secretary for "demonizing disagreement," and compared Rumsfeld to Murrow's old archenemy, Red-baiter Joseph McCarthy. The anchorman concluded with a clear reference to Rummy & Company: "This country faces a new type of fascism. Indeed!"

Olbermann's outspoken rants—which are punched up with humor, historic quotes and an undeniable sincerity—differentiate him from his colleagues and even fictional newsy characters, notably the deranged ex-anchor Howard Beale from the 1976 movie *Network*. Thirty years after its release, the satire trashing television feels more and more like a

documentary.

And yet Olbermann is up against the same industry forces that brought Beale down and pushed Murrow out—an anxious, profit-driven executive bureaucracy terrified of rocking the boat. Olbermann has already been warned not to have too many “liberal” guests, a rationale used to end Phil Donahue’s program, MSNBC’s highest-rated show in 2003. On Al Franken’s Air America radio show, Olbermann defiantly revealed, “I got called into a vice-president’s office...and [was] told, ‘Hey, we don’t mind you interviewing these guys, but should you really have put liberals on consecutive nights?’”

Jeff Cohen, a former Donahue producer, finds this alarming. The author of the insider book *Cable News Confidential* discloses: “What Olbermann has done in the recent era was specifically banned by NBC management when I was at MSNBC with Phil Donahue four years ago.”

Cohen, who co-founded the media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) and who also worked at Fox and CNN, adds: “Setting oneself apart from what the others are selling can bring customers. Olbermann is a beneficiary of the shifting political environment that resulted from Bush disasters and years of brave activism and advocacy by progressives in Congress, civil liberties lawyers, MoveOn[.org] and thousands of hard-core activists who turned the tide—not to mention [Comedy Central’s Jon] Stewart and [Stephen] Colbert.”

Can Olbermann survive at General Electric-owned MSNBC if he is identified as a voice of the Left? It’s not a topic he was allowed to speak to this reporter about. MSNBC press liaison Jeremy Gaines finally responded to three e-mails requesting an Olbermann interview with a terse “The answer is ‘No.’”

I spoke informally to a former MSNBC president who thinks the anchorman’s days are numbered in the cautiously conservative NBC environment. But an NBC News V.P., who spoke off the record and is personally bullish on Olbermann, told me it has taken years for the newscaster to establish himself and that the network wants him to stay. Keith’s contract was due to expire in March 2007.

I asked the veep about the attitude of NBC President Bob Wright, who reportedly kowtows to GE, a defense contractor credited with building Ronald Reagan’s career. “Bob Wright is content agnostic, but financially religious” was the response, suggesting that as long as *Countdown*’s numbers are good, and the revenues are up, there will be no pressure on Olbermann to follow the party line.

FAIR’s Peter Hart contends that Olbermann is helping MSNBC, which has generally trailed Fox and CNN in the ratings. “Those of us on the outside have been saying for years that the best way for the cable news channels to compete with Fox would be to counterprogram by featuring hosts and guests who represent the Left/progressive end of the political spectrum, since those voices are nearly silent on national television.”

The media observer adds: “Olbermann represents a tentative step in that direction, and folks are watching. It’s also worth noting that they’re not watching a typical cable-news shoutfest—Olbermann is delivering passionate, articulate critiques of the powerful. The conventional wisdom...would have probably told you that was a horrible idea, but viewers seem to disagree,” Hart points out.

According to Dan Abrams, who runs (RAN) MSNBC, “[Olbermann’s] program could become a model for the newscast of the future. It’s a mix of straight news...with lighter fare and occasionally with some opinion.”

Although it was hard to find outspoken critics outside the Fox orbit and its echo chamber, Olbermann has attracted enemies and at least one death threat. On Fox’s media observer program News Watch, Christian conservative columnist Cal Thomas bestowed the “Turkey Award” on Keith last November for claiming 65-year-old Thomas dyed his jet-black hair.

On a more serious note, in October 2006 Olbermann received a letter at his New York home with an unidentified white powder in it. He immediately called police and was told not to go public, as this could tip off the sender. But when Murdoch’s New York Post published an account of the incident, the journalist went ballistic, in part because he insisted the newspaper’s story was wrong. Keith claims he did not ask for a medical checkup, as reported in the Post, and then spoke about what happened on the air:

“My first inclination was to wait until the start of the next workday to notify authorities. But the remote possibility that any delay might have endangered others led me to reverse my decision. ... The officer in charge of the 18 or so police officers who responded asked that I follow their protocol: a decontamination shower at the scene, the bagging and sealing of the clothes I was wearing at the time of the incident, and my transportation to an emergency room. I mean, not to overdo this, but they had to melt my keys and my wallet.”

Californian Chad Castagana was arrested in November 2006 by the FBI and charged with mailing threatening letters, along with white powder, to Olbermann, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, David Letterman, Jon Stewart and other high-profile figures. The 39-year-old suspect is a conservative blogger.

Being a target of right-wing wrath hasn’t deterred Olbermann from confronting the status quo and speaking up for others threatened by reactionary wingnuts. After talk radio’s Stephanie Miller received a letter that threatened her and antiwar mom Cindy Sheehan, Keith gallantly rose to their defense in a riveting rant championing the right to dissent. This earned him a tongue-in-cheek marriage proposal from the single and attractive radio hostess.

“The fact that I routinely refer to Keith as my future husband has more to do with my delusional nature than anything to do with his personal taste, which, I’m sure, is much more evolved,” jokes Miller, whose father, William Miller, was Barry Goldwater’s GOP running mate in 1964’s Presidential race.

In any case, Olbermann faces a daunting minefield at MSNBC, a part of the larger big media battleground where backstabbing, oversized egos and bottom-line pressures clash every day with journalistic values.

Keith Olbermann’s role model, Edward R. Murrow, was an early victim of these pressures, despite his renown and success. Can the gutsy TV host known as “Bloggerman” survive and prosper? Stay tuned, and as Murrow would say, “Good night, and good luck.”

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