

Filter Tips

By Michael Kinsley

To President Bush, the news is like a cigarette. You can get it filtered or unfiltered. And which way does he prefer it? Well, that depends on the circumstances. When he is trying to send a message to the public, Bush prefers to have it go out unfiltered. He feels, for example, that the “good news about Iraq” is getting filtered out by the national media. “Somehow you just got to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the American people,” he said the other day. So, lately he has been talking to local and regional media, whom he trusts to filter less.

But when he is on the receiving end, Bush prefers his news heavily filtered. “I glance at the headlines, just to get kind of a flavor,” he told Brit Hume of Fox News last month. But, “I rarely read the stories” because “a lot of times there’s opinions mixed in with news.” Instead, “I get briefed by [White House Chief of Staff] Andy Card and Condi [Rice, the national security adviser] in the morning.”

The president concluded, “The best way to get the news is from objective sources. And the most objective sources I have are people on my staff who tell me what’s happening in the world.”

Bush’s beef about news from Iraq is a variation on the famous complaint that the media never report about all the planes that land safely. And it’s true: Many American soldiers have not been killed since the war officially ended. You rarely read stories about all the electricity that works, or the many Iraqis who aren’t shouting anti-American slogans. For that matter, what about all the countries we haven’t invaded and occupied in the past year? And what about the unreported fact that Saddam Hussein has been removed from power? Well, maybe that isn’t actually unreported. But an unfilterish media would surely report it again and again in every story every day, in case people forgot.

Every president complains that the media are blocking his message, and the media complain that every administration wants to manage the news. It’s not only presidents. Everyone who has something to say in our media-saturated culture (and who doesn’t?) longs for ways to get that message out unmediated by someone else. In this media cacophony, the president probably has more ability to deliver his message without a filter than anyone else on earth. Anything the president says is automatically news. If he wants to commandeer all the TV networks for a speech in prime time, he can usually do it. The president can even hold a press conference, although this president rarely bothers.

Bush also will have a campaign war chest of \$170 million that he can spend in the next year delivering any message he wants, completely unfiltered. Who can top that? Well, until recently there was Saddam Hussein. He could talk as long as he wanted and Iraqi television never cut away for a commercial, let alone bring on annoying pundits to pick and pick and pick. And the next day’s Baghdad Gazette would publish every single word, also without any tedious analysis. A few others, such as Fidel Castro, still have this privilege. I was under the impression that George Bush found this distasteful—the sort of thing one might even tighten a boycott or start a war over.

George W. Bush doesn’t really want people to get the news unfiltered. He wants people to get the news filtered by George W. Bush. Or rather, he wants everyone to get the news filtered by the same people who apparently filter it for him. It’s an interesting epistemological question how our president knows what he thinks he knows and why he thinks it is less distorted than what the rest of us know or think we know. Every president lives in a cocoon of advisers who filter reality for him, but it’s stunning that this president actually seems to prefer getting his take on reality that way.

Bush apparently thinks (if that is the word) that the publicly available media contaminate the news with opinion but Condi Rice and Andy Card are objective reporters. Anyone who has either been a boss or had a boss will find it easier, knowing that Bush believes this, to understand how he can also believe that things are going swimmingly in Iraq. And where does the Rice-Card News Service obtain its uncontaminated information? Bush conceded his shocking suspicion that Rice and Card “probably read the news themselves.” They do? Whatever is next? The president apparently is willing to tolerate the reading of newspapers by his staff members in the privacy of their own homes, as long as they don’t flaunt this unseemly habit by bringing the wretched things into the White House or referring to them at staff meetings.

The president noted, though, that Rice and Card also get “news directly from participants on the world stage.” (“Hi, Achmed—it’s Condi. What’s going on there in Baghdad? What’s the weather like? And how’s traffic? Thanks, I’ll go tell the president and call you again in 15 minutes.”) The notion that these world-stagers are sources of objective opinion while newspaper reporters are burdened by insuppressible opinions and hidden agendas is another odd one.

When it comes to unfiltered news, the president says he can dish it out and actually brags that he can’t take it. In fact, he can’t do either one.