

Wake-Up Time

Yes, Bush has bullied the national media. But are they really powerless? Only if they play along. Herewith, five suggestions for how the Fourth Estate can stop the charade.

By Eric Alterman and Michael Tomasky

Are our national media—schoolyard silly during campaign 2000, by turns somnolent and sycophantic ever since—starting to rouse themselves from their long torpor? It's still way too early to answer that question with a "yes," but if that's what the answer turns out to be, the first week of February may have marked a turning point.

In that week, the media started raising new questions about the justification for the Iraq War; broke an important story about the administration knowing last fall that the Medicare bill would cost \$134 billion more than it let on to its employers (the public); broke another about a probe of alleged bribes at Dick Cheney's Halliburton; and finally, led by *The Boston Globe's* Walter Robinson, started to take a semi-meaningful look into George W. Bush's disputed National Guard record.

Don't start dancing to the music just yet, though. Bad habits die hard, and we've all come to expect too little genuine journalism and far too much of what might be called "journalism-related program activity." This is what we got back in 2000, when Al Gore was deemed a lying SOB for statements he made that were wholly accurate. (Gore *did* play a large role in creating the predecessor to the Internet, he *did* hold the hearings that "discovered" contamination at Love Canal, and his only mistake regarding that most crucial of "lies" about who inspired the characters in Erich Segal's *Love Story* was *accurately* recalling a decades-old mistaken story in *The Tennessean*.) Remember, he was running against a guy who couldn't remember a year of his military service or anything connected with a million-dollar bailout he received regarding a fishy stock sale during which he was privy to inside information about the same stock's likely collapse. But hardly anyone thought those questions worth examining.

That was campaign 2000: almost no investigation of Bush's past and aggressive misrepresentation in his favor when the stories finally did come up. Karl Rove couldn't have asked for anything more.

We understand: It's tough out there. Campaign reporters have grueling jobs and can't always be expected to produce big-picture journalism. In the Bush White House, meanwhile, journalists have been forced to do their jobs under profoundly onerous conditions. In his much-discussed January 19 *New Yorker* article, Ken Auletta detailed the multiple ways in which the Bush administration has successfully shackled reporters. Among the straitjacket techniques detailed there and elsewhere: limited (or no) access, interviews granted on restrictive terms, rare presidential press conferences, and substance-less "availabilities" in which reporters get to ask Bush two or three questions, which they have been told had best relate to the topic Bush wants to discuss. The reporters described by Auletta's diligent reporting seem to believe themselves all but powerless to resist.

Come now. This isn't Pacifica Radio we're discussing here. These are the largest, richest, most powerful media corporations in the world, billion-dollar babies with plenty of resources at their disposal. What's one presidential administration to them? In time, Bush will be back in Crawford swatting Titleists. The Sulzbergers and the Grahams, to say nothing of General Electric and AOL Time Warner, will never be removed from office. That their journalists in Washington—with a small but still significant number of admirable exceptions—have quietly caved in to these conditions may or may not be unethical, but it is disgraceful. That the owners have let it happen will be their shameful legacy.

The fat lady has not yet completed her aria, however. The Democrats have stiffened their spines, and Bush's problems have grown unignorable. Election 2004 offers ample

opportunity for the ambitious men and women of the Fourth Estate to reassert their power and professional pride. It is in that hope and spirit that we offer the following suggestions for reporters and editors this time around:

1. Go beyond the “he said, she said” and tell us what you believe to be true and important about a story. The chief convention of most news reporting—this side says this, that side says that—needs a drastic rethink. In the age of spin, an age brought to new lows by this White House, a formula that requires giving equal weight to both sides ends up helping the side that’s lying. So when Bush says, as he often did during the last campaign, “[B]y far, the vast majority of my tax cuts go to those at the bottom end of the spectrum,” this obvious and factually checkable lie got the same play in most stories as the truth did. The he said, she said convention actually blurred the truth.

This reflex was at work in the major papers’ coverage of Bush’s February 7 *Meet the Press* interview. Some of the news stories were skeptical, especially Dana Milbank’s in *The Washington Post*. Even so, Bush plainly made several claims that simply were not true. Reporters were aware of this, having received a well-documented fact-check from the Center for American Progress within hours of the interview’s broadcast. Still, many allowed Bush to continue to attempt to justify the war on grounds that had already been discredited.

We’ve entered an age in which instantaneous Web analyses are quickly getting readers accustomed to ways of taking in news that are more frank and opinionated. Editors need to reconsider these conventions and reinvigorate them so that they are less concerned with giving equal weight to each side and more concerned with pursuing the factual truth (and yes, this should apply to lying Democrats as well). Truth is sometimes elusive and hard to pin down. It is, however, the point.

2. Challenge the master narrative with genuine investigative reporting. Do you have a good idea of how presidential sibling Neil Bush makes his money these days? Can you describe even briefly what Interior Secretary Gale Norton has been up to for the last three years? Can you name three (or even one) of Bush’s top 10 corporate contributors? Do you know anything about The Carlyle Group beyond the fact that the president’s father is affiliated with it?

If the media were working properly, you’d be able to answer at least a couple of those questions. But unless you’re among America’s most ferocious newshounds, you can’t. And the reason you can’t is that investigative reporting has all but disappeared in Washington.

We’re aware of the many reasons for this problem: reduced newsroom budgets, Bush administration intimidation, and more. But the primary culprit is the tyranny of an instant news cycle coupled with the power of the master narrative. The cable shows, the Sunday shows, the major news weeklies, and, to a lesser extent, the leading editorial and op-ed pages—with the hard-right radio world providing the background white noise—establish a story line: Bill Clinton is Slick Willie, George W. Bush is Winston Churchill. All Democrats are sissies unless proven otherwise. In the land of the 24-hour news-cycle, the narrative, which gets repeated over and over until it takes on the veneer of being true even when it’s nonsensical, is king.

With the glorious exception of the indomitable Seymour Hersh (and damn few others), the Washington media have given this administration an almost total pass. Even the one criminal probe into the administration, the Valerie Plame-leak investigation, was itself leaked to *The Washington Post* by a disgruntled administration official and only became a full-blown story after the Department of Justice announced its investigation.

Speaking at Harvard University last spring, *Washington Post* Executive Editor Len Downie said the following: “So if you do tough investigative reporting about Democrats

or about issues that are important to the left, you'll get a strong backlash from the left. Similarly, if you do tough investigative reporting of the Republicans or people on the right, you'll get a strong backlash from them. And I think this is also having an impact on the media. It's scaring people."

There you have it. The top editor at America's second most-important newspaper admits that angry phone calls and e-mails are frightening editors (it's a good thing there was no Internet when Ben Bradlee was editor, we guess). And in a bit of painful poetic justice, the paper's most famous and once-great investigative reporter, Bob Woodward, has reverted to the role of court stenographer; channeling the majesty, greatness, and unwavering resolve of Bush, Cheney, and company in exchange for unrestricted access to national-security meetings and documents that are routinely denied to more critically minded reporters.

3. Show proportionality in covering controversies. In the runup to John Kerry's February 3 victories in five states, *The New York Times'* Glen Justice and John Tierney published a front-page article examining Kerry's and other Democrats' contributions from special interests. Fair enough: The public has a right to know. But it also has a right to knowledge that's placed in some sort of sensible context. Take a look at this sentence, for instance: "Mr. Kerry denounces President Bush for catering to the rich, but he has depended more heavily on affluent donors than the other leading Democrats except for another populist, Senator John Edwards." Just how does Kerry's standing vis-à-vis the *other Democrats* provide a useful measure of whether Bush caters to the rich? And do Kerry's contributions from special interests come even close to those of the president? This question is not explored with reporting. Instead, the authors tell us, using the paradigmatic "to be sure" construction, "To be sure, none of the Democrats have collected donations on the scale of President Bush's campaign, and they generally avoid donations from political action committees. But the Democrats are hardly naifs when it comes to enlisting support from special interests in Washington and elsewhere, from corporate leaders and from unions in the public and private sectors."

Talk about your false constructions. Did anyone accuse the Democrats of being "naifs when it comes to enlisting support from special interests in Washington and elsewhere, from corporate leaders and from unions in the public and private sectors"? A single sentence of context—provided with no numbers whatever—hardly gives readers a fair sense of who's giving what to whom. Rather, it plays perfectly into the Rove game plan of selling the country to special interests while proclaiming it to be in the public good. It would have taken Justice and Tierney about 90 seconds to go to a Web site every political journalist knows and discover that in fact, Bush has received 28 times more money in PAC donations than Kerry has.

4. A little solidarity on behalf of the truth, please. ABC Political Director Mark Halperin began a campaign awhile back for reporters to break former Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer of his habit of ignoring questions he didn't like by calling on another reporter who would conveniently change the subject. Great idea, but it went nowhere. The apogee of a servile media was reached on television a year ago when reporters sat still for a perfectly scripted imitation of a prime-time press conference that had fewer surprises in it than the umpteenth viewing of an old *I Love Lucy* episode. There's really nothing that should prevent political reporters from agreeing not to ask a new question until their colleague gets a satisfactory answer to his or hers. In the long run, such a rule (which should of course be applied to Democrats, too) would help everyone.

But it isn't just reporters who should show solidarity. The news organizations they work for need to do the same. Last year, Jonathan Weisman, an economics reporter at *The Washington Post*, published a letter detailing the terms laid down by the White House that he would have to accept to get an interview with an administration official

for a story about outgoing economic adviser R. Glenn Hubbard: The interview would be off the record only, quotes Weisman wanted to use would have to be e-mailed to the press office in advance of publication, and, if approved, the quotes could be attributed to “a White House official.” Weisman went on to note that even after he met all these conditions, the official he was quoting demanded that the quote be changed—that words never spoken be placed within quotation marks. When Weisman met this demand only halfway and the story appeared, he was met with “an angry denunciation by the White House press official,” telling him that he had broken his word and “violated journalistic ethics.” As Weisman acknowledged, he had violated ethics—by agreeing to all this nonsense in the first place.

The blame here rests not with Weisman, who was brave enough to publicize these details, but with his employer. Why should the big, powerful *Washington Post* bow to terms like these? On a regular basis, our greatest media institutions are accepting conditions that every undergraduate journalism student in the country is taught to reject. Individual reporters, scrambling for access and scoops, can’t change this on their own. It’s up to their bosses and owners.

5. Don’t let non-news organs drive the news cycle. This may be the most important point, and you need only think back to the last election to see how it might work this time. Some right-wing radio host or FOX will push some tale about the Democratic nominee. It will either be an outright deception (Gore and Love Canal), a perverse distortion of something that contains a small kernel of truth (Gore and the famous “standing student” in Sarasota, Florida), or something completely irrelevant to the man’s qualifications to run the country (Gore and fully buttoned brown suits). It will be framed as reflecting the nominee’s “character.” And many voters, who pay only moderate attention to the news and don’t give any thought to how and why the information in front of them gets there, will buy into it.

Every serious journalist will know, deep down, that it’s exaggerated, unfair, and orchestrated. But it won’t matter. It will travel from the right-wing media to the cable shows (if, indeed, that can be called “traveling” at all) and then land on the network news shows and the front pages and op-ed pages of the respectable newspapers.

A lot of things get “reported” on shows like *Hardball with Chris Matthews* and *The O’Reilly Factor*, and by people like Matt Drudge and Rush Limbaugh, that are, to be more than generous, not exactly nailed down. The fact that they are “out there,” as an MSNBC producer once said about the report that a witness had caught Clinton and Monica Lewinsky in the act inside the White House, is not a reason for journalists to put their own names and that of their news organizations behind them. Journalists need to ask themselves not only whether a story is true but whether it’s significant. Is it somehow more important that John Kerry may have gotten a Botox shot when the nation’s deficit is shooting out of control and Iraq is proving not only unmanageable but turns out to have never been threatening?

The high-minded dodge for tabloid reporting of this type can be found in claims like that of Mickey Kaus: “[T]he Kerry Botox story is not a frivolous bit of gossip but a perfectly legitimate synecdoche for this type of Kerry behavior.” Well, anything can be declared a “perfectly legitimate synecdoche” for any type of behavior by that standard. Botox or no Botox—and we don’t have a position on this—has nothing whatever to do with carrying out the duties of the presidency. Save that crap for those who at least admit to being entertainers first and journalists second (if at all).

Journalists are supposed to enjoy their work and take pride in it. Otherwise, why bother? We are not typically overpaid or commanding of the respect in society that doctors or successful businesspeople enjoy. The profession experienced an all-too-brief injection of self-worth in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. “When you find yourself covering sex and sleaze stories, you’re not terribly proud of it,” explained Clarence Page,

a *Chicago Tribune* columnist. “It wasn’t the kind of thing I could go home and talk to my kid about. Now my son comes to me with questions about Afghanistan. I feel proud of what I do. . . .”

If journalists demonstrated the kind of tenacity in going after key political stories that they did during that brief shining moment, well, America will have an election worthy of the world’s oldest democracy, and reporters and editors alike will be able to speak proudly of the charge given to them by its oldest written constitution: to protect and defend the public’s right to know its leaders—and to choose them wisely.