

Media Establishmentarianism

By JAKE HIGHTON

Emeritus journalism professor

University of Nevada, Reno

Email: jake@unr.edu

Presented at Hawaii University International Conferences on Arts and Humanities

Honolulu, Hawaii

January 8 to 10, 2012

Media Establishmentarianism

This is a polemical article-essay but one supported by history and media critics. The burden of the indictment is that the media have often supported America on the wrong side of history, been boosters rather than critics, and often either ducked or censored the truth. So many media outlets are superficial, slanted, and even propagandistic. The media do not serve democracy. America's corporate media guarantee a conservative country.

America has always been a land of hypocrisy. Samuel Johnson, great 18th century Londoner, rightly asked: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from drivers of Negroes?" And editor Frederick Douglass gave a Fourth of July speech in 1852 declaring that Independence Day was not for him as a black man.

"What to the American slave is your Fourth of July?" Douglass asked. "To him your celebration is a sham...Your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery...for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy America reigns without a rival...The existence of slavery in this country brands your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad."

Yet American hubris is stunning. Americans ignore the words of Justice Louis Brandeis in a 1928 Supreme Court dissent: "Our government is the potent, omnipresent teacher. For good or ill, it teaches the whole people by its example." And it teaches the whole world. What it teaches is often despicable.

Nevertheless, far too many Americans speak of the nation's exceptionalism. They think it is not just the greatest nation on Earth, but the greatest nation that ever existed.

Even the laid-back President Obama has a compelling need to boast. Speaking in September about the need for jobs, he declared that “the United States of America remains the greatest nation on Earth.”

The record says otherwise.

America has spread its military tentacles over the globe, becoming an uglier ugly American. It has engaged in more than 100 wars and invasions since the American Revolution, nearly all unjustified.

The late historian Howard Zinn wrote: “We must face our long history of ethnic cleansing in which millions of Indians were driven off their land by means of massacres and forced evacuations. And our long history...of slavery, segregation, and racism. We must face our record of imperial conquest, in the Caribbean and in the Pacific, our shameful wars ... Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq. And the lingering memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is not a history of which we can be proud.”

Media critic Noam Chomsky adds: “The U.S. conquered half of Mexico...conquered Hawaii and the Philippines (killing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos)...The number of victims is colossal.”

The 2,977 American deaths in 9/11 pales in comparison. Yet too often the media have supported this sordid history either outrightly or silently.

Mickey Huff in his book, *Censored 2012*, denounces the Establishment media:

“The ungoing corporate feeding frenzy at the trough of the factually groundless and absurd has only intensified over the past decade, whether promulgating faux fears--from killer

bee attacks to various flu viruses--or pushing nonexistent weapons of mass destruction and the Orwellian, nebulously defined yet unending war on terror.

“Meanwhile, the corporate media fill so-called news time with faux-angst, Astroturf platforms, cult-of-personality disorders, and one manufactured irrelevant crisis after another. It appears to be a Herculean effort to avoid telling the public what’s really going on at home and abroad: with the economy, with the environment, and in Afghanistan.”

Where the Establishment media often dodge the truth or damaging details, online news organizations like *Truthout* and *Reader Supported News* do not. But their truth-telling does not have the impact of Establishment media.

Right-wing talk radio dominates the public airwaves, even dwarfing the reach of right-wing cable TV outlets such as the propagandistic Fox.

Any newspaper lover sympathizes with the terrible plight of the business. But cutting its stars is a terrible solution. The *San Francisco Chronicle* no longer carries the acerbic and wonderful essayist, Mark Morford. It no longer publishes the excellent liberal columnist Robert Scheer.

But the *Chronicle* continues to fill its opinion section with conservative editorials and columns, particularly galling since San Francisco is the most liberal city in America. It runs the great comic strip *Doonesbury* reduced to an almost unreadable size.

During the budget squabble last summer Ilyse Hogue, formerly of *MoveOn.org*, wrote in the *The Nation* magazine: “The press skewed coverage away from reporting the facts in favor of presenting both parties’ claims equally regardless of facts. As a result most major media reported that both sides were compromising when in fact the GOP--the party less representative of the views of most American--was winning far more concessions and compromising far less.”

Chris Hedges, former reporter for the *New York Times*, told David Barsamian in an August 2011 interview with *Progressive* magazine: “People who rise through the ranks of the *Times* become vetted, conditioned, harassed, and shaped by the institution.”

He cited an example: “I was sent to cover the first Gulf War (1991) but I wouldn’t embed. We were forced to sign documents by the military when we got off the plane saying that we would, in essence, be servants of the military. The newspaper reduced us to little more than propagandists.”

More Hedges, this time in *Truthdig*, an online opinion piece on Sept. 5: “War, as long as you view it through the distorted lens of the corporate media, is not only entertaining, but allows

3

us to confuse state power with personal power. It permits us to wallow in unchecked self-exaltation. We are a nation that loves to love itself.”

Hedges on Obama: “He has ruthlessly prosecuted the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where military planners speak of a continued U.S. presence for the next couple of decades. He has greatly expanded our proxy wars, which rely heavily on drone and missile attacks, as well as clandestine operations in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Lybia.”

Paul Krugman, *New York Times* columnist, rightly objected on July 29 to the “balance phobia”: “Some of us have long complained about the cult of balance, the insistence on portraying both parties as equally at fault on any issue. I joked long ago that if one party declared that the Earth was flat the headlines would read: “Views Differ on Shape of Planet.”

This phony balance reminds you of the Churchill remark about giving “Jesus and Judas equal time.”

The Sunday interview shows are woefully unbalanced. In 2011 Sen. John McCain, an Arizona conservative, appeared 10 times. Appearances of Sen. Bernie Sanders, a liberal from Vermont? Zero. As Robert Greenwood of Brave New Foundation put it in a June opinion piece: “Sanders is a bold voice and one that’s missing every Sunday.”

And yet so many Americans insist that the media are liberal. The fact is that people in the news with the least to say appear on TV the most.

Martha Sorren, in a *Truthout* book review Aug. 22, blasted the Disney empire as “creeping cultural hegemony.” Reviewing “The Mouse That Roared” by Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock, Sorren wrote:

“Cuddly cartoon animals and whimsical fairy-tale stories are merely Disney’s public face. The expansive conglomerate is not limited to Disney film and theme parks. It also owns six motion picture studios, ABC television network and its 226 affiliated stations, multiple cable TV networks, 227 radio stations, four music companies, three cruise lines, theatrical production companies, publishing houses and 15 magazine titles.”

Justice William O. Douglas left no doubt in his two autobiographies--*Go East Young Man* and *The Court Years*--of his devotion to a free press but was highly critical of the press itself. He called the press “craven, abusive and self-seeking,” as depraved as Jefferson had found it.

Douglas praised muckrakers like I.F Stone but said too many reporters “lived on government handouts or curried favor with high officials.”

He rightly said: “The official line that was pushed by the government about Vietnam was often half-truths, distorted facts or plain lies as the Pentagon Papers later were to show.” He

denounced the tyranny of the majority, rule by ignoramuses who believed that Saddam Hussein played a key role in 9/11.

Newspapers are justifiably worried about falling circulation and plunging advertising revenues in the Digital Age. To combat these baleful trends newspapers have cut salaries, slashed staffs, cut back on investigative reporting, curbed essential local reporting, closed bureaus at home and abroad, and eliminated many outstanding columnists and essayists.

It is an answer that only adds to the dullness of Establishment journalism. Newspapers are printing fewer sections, cutting columnists and folding sports and business sections into other parts of the paper. The result: even duller newspapers.

I.F. Stone, great radical journalist, was blacklisted by the media after he had the temerity to urge national health insurance on “Meet the Press” in 1949. Noam Chomsky, leftist and media critic, is *persona non grata* in mainstream newspapers. No Establishment newspaper carries his column. No Establishment newspaper carries a socialist columnist.

Newspapers have so often betrayed the First Amendment, the most glorious thing about the United States. As Amy and David Goodman write in their book, *The Exception to the Rulers*: “This is not a media serving a democratic society. This is a well-oiled propaganda machine that is repackaging government spin.”

America is a plutocracy where wealth rules through huge corporate donations to politicians. Media critic Robert McChesney points out in *The Problem of the Media* that money rigs the system “to foil the will of the people. Our Congress and the executive branch have become corrupted by our system of legalized bribery--political campaign contributions.”

The Citizens United decision by the Supreme Court in 2010 was devastating, giving the rich a far more powerful First Amendment than nearly all Americans have. The Supreme Court

in 2011 struck down an Arizona statute that tried to level the playing field so that the not-so-rich candidates had a better chance to compete.

America is a profoundly conservative country with a skewed election system. The Senate is a woefully minoritarian body. It has two senators from Wyoming, with 500,000 people, and two from California, with 38 million people. Such a setup means that 17 percent of the population controls what is passed by Congress.

It takes an undemocratic 60 votes in the Senate to break a filibuster, thwarting many good measures. America's Electoral College is antediluvian, four times giving the presidency to the candidate with fewer popular votes.

The problem in America was set forth succinctly by Jim Hightower, author of the newsletter, *The Hightower Lowdown*: "A handful of self-serving corporate fiefdoms now control practically all of America's mass-market sources of news and information."

The result is that only news that meets the Establishment standard reaches the bulk of American people. Media monopoly freezes out independent voices. Leftist publications like *The Nation* and *The Progressive* have relatively few readers, skimpy circulations and no impact.

The great American broadcaster, Edward R. Murrow, lost the battle to make television operate in the public interest rather than the commercial interest. As Bob Edwards recounts in his biography of Murrow, CBS boss William Paley "began to regard Murrow's aggressive journalism as a liability to network business interests."

Murrow's case suggests that ethics courses in journalism schools are of questionable value. What is really needed are ethics courses for television owners, producers, and news directors as well as for newspaper editors and publishers.

Michael Parenti in *Inventing Reality* indicts the U.S. media as handmaidens of capitalism with its all-pervasive Establishment view. Communism is evil, capitalism sacred. The United States is wonderful, the Soviet Union was terrible.

Parenti wrote: "When the Sandinistas (in Nicaragua) embarked on a program of socialist reconstruction, the American press saw the emergence of a Marxist regime with no explanation of why this was so terrible. Nor need the press have offered an explanation. After almost a century of propaganda, designations like Marxist, communist or leftist, create their own automatic framing."

Even on liberal public broadcasting the range of opinion is narrow. Alexander Cockburn in *Corruptions of Empire* wrote: "The mix is ludicrously respectable, almost always heavily Establishment in tone. The spectrum of opinion is one that ranges from the corporate right to cautious center-liberal."

Soviet censorship was overt. U.S. censorship is covert: self-censorship.

One of the most searing things about the U.S. media is its cowardliness. Time and again broadcast and print refuse to air or run stories that run counter to the government viewpoint. *Into the Buzzsaw* confirms the subtitle: "*Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of a Free Press.*" The book deals with stories that were neither printed nor aired.

Essays indict CBS, CNN, and Fox for their coverups, censorship, and pusillanimity. The essence of the *Buzzsaw* indictment: the press is free to cover ephemera like the death of Princess Diana and the O.J. Simpson murder trial. But it is another matter when stories are about CIA drug trafficking, October "surprises" just before a presidential election, U.S. destruction of Iraq's water supply, and U.S. funding of human rights abuses.

CNN is in bed with the Tea Party, co-sponsoring a debate with the Republicans in September, *Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting* notes. As the media watchdog says: “It is difficult to imagine why a serious news organization would want to have anything to do with such a group.”

In 1998 the *Cincinnati Enquirer* ran a damning investigative story about Chiquita banana under the headline: “Power, Money and Control, Chiquita Secrets Revealed.” Those secrets dealt with unethical and illegal business practices overseas. But since reporter Mike Gallagher “got the goods” from voice mails a Chiquita whistleblower leaked to him, he was fired “for stealing personal corporate private property.” Then the gutless newspaper not only printed a retraction, but gave Chiquita \$10 million compensation. No one denied the truth of the story.

Eric Alterman, in a Sept. 19 column in *The Nation*, asks two questions that answer themselves: “Why have reporters been so easily taken in by Republican bromides designed to mask their protection racket for the rich? Should not the job of the media be to defeat what John Maynard Keynes called ‘the dark forces of time and ignorance which envelop our future?’ ”

One huge problem in newspapering is second-rate editors who are too respectful of authority, too deferential to power. Walter Pincus, former national security reporter for the *Washington Post*, often had front page stories buried on page 17. Reporter Chris Hedges tells how he often had to fight two wars at the *New York Times*: one against Washington officials and the other with his editors.

Such editors tend to bury important stories. The Museum of Children’s Art in Oakland, Calif., planned an exhibit of artwork by Palestinian kids from 9 to 11. But after opposition, primarily from Jewish groups, the museum canceled the exhibition scheduled for September.

Two glaring problems. One, it was clearly a page one story in the Bay Area but the *San Francisco Chronicle* “hid” the story in section three. Two, it did not have an angry editorial denouncing the museum for yielding to pressure.

The exhibit was organized by the Middle East Children’s Alliance. The director of the group, Barbara Lubin, rightly said: “They are pictures of what these children experienced.” So naturally the pictures showed tanks, bombs dropping, and people getting shot.

One museum board member said the objections had become a distraction. And the chairman of the board said: “Upon further review and engagement with the community it became clear that this exhibit was not appropriate for an open gallery accessible by all children.”

Craven board, craven newspaper.

The media present what Arthur Rowse in *Drive-By Journalism* calls “junk food journalism,” emphasizing soft news, entertainment at the expense of serious news, and allowing political campaigns to degenerate into image over substance and trivia over important public issues. The U.S. media present too much he-said, she-said journalism that ignores the truth.

Journalism schools, too, are part of the Establishment. Outspoken critics of U.S. policies and wars are not invited to speak at journalism schools. Journalism schools want speakers who entertain rather than utter damaging truths.

Broadcasters and newspaper editors often keep dissenting views off the air or refuse to print them. As A.J. Liebling, the great U.S. press critic, put it: “To the foundation of a school for publishers failing which no school of journalism can have meaning.”

Liebling pointed out still another truth: “The function of the press in society is to inform, but its role is to make money.” This is a profound ethical question that is seldom asked in journalism schools.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reaped an astonishing 17 Pulitzer prizes in 18 years. But Michael Shapiro noted in a *Columbia Journalism Review* article that former owner Knight-Ridder ruined a great paper by “endless meddling, cutting, and demands for ever greater profits from its corporate masters.” The paper was no longer committed to good journalism. It was committed to stockholders.

TV news is shallow and superficial. "If it bleeds it leads" is the local TV mantra. We get scant coverage of the issues in campaigns. What we do get is the "horse race" effect, who is leading and who is trailing.

Thomas Nast, great American editorial cartoonist in the 19th century, uttered a dictum that remains true to this day: "policy strangles individuals." It is difficult for a journalist to get through the iron curtain of Establishment newspaper and broadcast editorial policy.

The *New York Times* banished Ray Bonner to the business section in the 1980s after he told the truth about the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador. Bill Kovach resigned as editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in the 1990s after the owners objected to his reporting of racist bank lending policies, and bribery schemes of Coca-Cola, an Atlanta corporation. Columnist Sydney Schanberg quit the *New York Times* after editors kept killing his columns that opposed *Times* editorial policy.

The *Times* delayed its explosive story about the National Security Agency spying for one year at the behest of White House officials worried that it might damage the Bush re-election campaign. The *Times* was working for the White House, not the American people.

The question is why self-censorship or refusal to run controversial stories? Chomsky's answer is that Establishment values and thinking are deeply inculcated.

Sydney Gruson, *New York Times* correspondent in Guatemala, was fired in 1954 by publisher Arthur Sulzberger at the behest of the Central Intelligence Agency because he was "politically unsound."

Media critic Ben Bagdikian has written: "The underlying reason most good reporters leave journalism is their belief that the institution will not let them deal with the central problems of their communities in an intellectually honest and thorough way." Seymour Hersh, a marvelous investigative reporter, quit the *New York Times* because "it wouldn't let him do the kinds of stories he wanted to do."

The *Times* went into paroxysms about the fiction of reporter Jayson Blair. But it said little about something that really mattered: the non-existent weapons of mass destruction and mushroom clouds breathlessly reported to be in Iraq by the *Times*' Judy Miller.

The question is: why self-censorship, refusal to run explosive stories, and burial of important stories among the lingerie ads? Media critic Chomsky's answer is that Establishment values and thinking are deeply inculcated.

Reporters and editors are deeply embedded in American society. Schools, religion, and newspapers and television mold them into Establishment thinking.

"Reporters and editors are products of the same socialization as the media owners and political leaders," press critic Parenti notes. Therefore the orthodox view appears as an objective representation of reality itself."

The idea of American exceptionalism is absurd. America is the richest country in the world yet shamefully it does not have:

- Universal national health coverage, an absolute human right.
- Free public education from day care through college.

- Federally paid maternity and paternity leave.
- A federal law mandating five-week vacations for all workers.
- Federal subsidies for single mothers.

All these objectives could easily be paid for if America ended its everlasting and multiple wars, or what anti-war activist Tom Hayden calls shadow wars and long wars.

A Vermont law professor, James Speth, notes that among the 20 major advanced countries America has:

- The greatest inequality of incomes.
- The highest poverty rate generally and for children specifically.
- The lowest number of paid holidays.
- The lowest government spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product on social programs for the disadvantaged.

Finally, let me conclude with a personal observation. I go back to the typewriter days of newspapering--not the quill pen days I hasten to add--so I appreciate the marvels of today's technology. The wonders of the Internet. The amazing social media.

But just as the magnificent Digital Age will not lead to a better, a more just, a more equal America, so the American media will continue to be led by Establishment figures--to the detriment of the nation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Howard Zinn. *A People's History of the United States*.

Ben Bagdikian. *The Media Monopoly*.

Noam Chomsky. *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*.

Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: the Political Economy of the Mass Media*.

Todd Gitlin. *Media Unlimited*.

Amy and David Goodman. *Exceptions to the Rulers*.

Into the Buzzsaw. Leading Journalists Expose the Myth of a Free Press.

Feet to the Fire. The Media After 9/11.

James Loewen. *Lies My Teacher Told Me*.

Robert McChesney. *The Problem of the Media*.

———. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*.

Michael Parenti. *Inventing Reality: the Politics of News Media*

Norman Solomon. *The Habits of Highly Deceptive Media*.

Solomon and Jeff Cohen. *Wizards of Media Oz*.

Solomon and Martin Lee. *Unreliable Sources*.

Arthur E. Rowse. *Drive-by Journalism*.

A.J. Liebling. *The Wayward Pressman and The Press*.