

Breeding a press of water carriers, or the Age of Aquarius

Part I: From my perspective

By James Higdon

I remember the first time that I understood, with complete clarity and utter certainty, that the media were acting in support of the right wing (particularly the fiscal right), and was in no way objective. This is a lesson that has to be learned by each successive generation . . . —The Diva, Tammy Talpas

July 18, 2001—I rarely watch broadcast news anymore. I don't listen to it on the radio either, other than to check traffic reports and the weather. I've discarded from my life all talking heads and disembodied voices that offer to "inform" me. Don't get me wrong. I am a "news junkie."

I spend several hours a day pouring through information from sources I trust. But quite frankly, I've grown tired of being lied to. Lies coming from the broadcast frequencies that I, and the rest of the American citizenry own. I see no purpose to being gentle, or kind here. The time has long passed for mincing words with amiable complaint.

Tony Snow, Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, Dr. Laura, Tim Russert, Cokie Roberts, Sam Donaldson, and others too numerous to name, you are all congenital liars. I challenge you to prove to the American people that you are not, but you can't and you won't. Even if you could, for just one moment, rise above you cowardice, and confront criticism to its face, I would strip each of you naked with specific lists of the lies that you've told. You are, each of you, spoiled and pampered rich children, with no greater purpose than to protect your corner of the sandbox, while sucking from a corporate teat. There is not a one of you who would even vaguely consider rising above your petty self-interest to address or answer to something higher. I believe you are completely oblivious to the damage you have done, and are doing, as accessories to the destruction of the world's greatest engine of enlightened discourse and democracy.

In Ken Burns' excellent documentary, *The Civil War*, historian/author Shelby Foote was asked the cause of America's bloodiest conflict. He said that the Civil War was caused by our failure to compromise in that time and place. Mr. Foote said that one tends to think of Americans as an uncompromising people, but in fact, that is our brilliance. "Our whole government is founded on it," he said, and he is right. But in order to compromise, competing factions must understand the issues and perspectives from both sides. That requires an honest forum of ideas, and free, national discourse. Without that, democratic principles will shrivel, and we will lose the republic that Ben Franklin once challenged us to keep.

Our forefathers guaranteed us the right to a free press, and with every right comes responsibility. As it is said, "absolute power corrupts absolutely." It seems logical to me, then, that the absolute

corruption that is born from absolute power is the absolute lack of responsibility. When a small cadre of financial interests takes complete charge of the most influential vehicle of our national discourse, taking absolute power over it, there can only be the absolute corruption of our ancestors' greatest legacy, a free and open press.

I am 48 years old. I am a member of the first generation that grew up with a television as the constant feature in every family room. I grew up with legends delivering the nightly news from the various television networks. I remember Howard K. Smith, Harry Reasoner, Chet Huntley, and of course, "the most trusted man in America," Walter Cronkite. All were mentored to some degree by the greatest legend of them all, Edward R. Murrow, who created the standard that all subsequent broadcast journalists were expected to follow. It is the legacy of these giants that the sniveling likes of Bill O'Reilly (the on-air voice of his master, Rupert Murdoch) promises repeatedly to destroy.

O'Reilly, and the rest of his band of blithering idiots, equate any federally sponsored social consciousness with socialism or communism. Such is the excuse given by the "Taliban" wing of the Republican right to deny the people access to the national microphone. The podium once occupied by fairness in presenting all reasonable points of view, was fenced off by Bush I, sadly neglected by Bill Clinton, and will shortly be dismantled for all time by Bush II. Very shortly, as a quid pro quo for granting complete control of the airwaves to a handful of *financial* elitists, America will hear little over the airwaves but the propaganda of *power* elitists. The successful war against the First Amendment will have been won by a two-pronged attack. The first attack shut down the Fairness Doctrine, the regulation that promised the people that opposing voices would always have the chance to be heard; the second attack assaulted anti-monopoly and anti-trust laws that prevented conglomeration of the airwaves into the hands of only a few.

Once I considered that all of this was the accidental outcome of a capitalist society, but now I believe that there is deliberate design. Before I am accused of being another wild-eyed conspiracy theorist, no, I don't believe that there is one small active group seeking to enslave America, but I do believe that there is a "loose cabal" of entities with their own agenda that have an implicit understanding of the consequences of the current course of events. For those few seeking exclusive ownership of our airwaves, they see the opportunity for massive profits by holding total control over a very limited national resource. For those few seeking to eliminate opposing viewpoints, they see the success of an agenda already discarded by the majority of Americans at the polls. The partnership of the two understand the national implications and consequences, which emerge as being unworthy of concern when weighed against their own narrow self-interests.

The specious excuse given for this dismantling of the First Amendment, from the inside out, is silencing the voice of "the liberal media." Our founding fathers understood that the way a democracy must operate to combat any point of view is to provide a more powerful, dissenting opinion, not to deny access to the debate. What is an attack on the First Amendment if it is not the attempt to silence a particular voice? Yet, I should not go too far out of bounds by even answering a notion that has less substance than a fairy tale. Anyone who can weigh the facts, and then even consider that broadcast news was ever liberal, sits so far to the right that they are quite willing to point to the likes of Rush Limbaugh as a voice of reason.

The master propagandists in the Third Reich taught us that if you tell the big lie often enough, it will become a part of the national lexicon. The author of this particular big lie was Spiro T. Agnew, Richard Nixon's vice president. Agnew was forced from office on charges of bribery, and taking bribes. This paragon of truth subsequently pleaded "no contest." Richard Nixon won the presidency, in part, because he had promised the American people that he had a plan to end the war in Vietnam, and to maintain America's robust economy. By the time he was running for a second term in 1972, the war had been steadily escalated, and we had been drawn into a deep recession. Any reporters who simply stated this truth were referred to by Agnew as "nattering nabobs of negativity," and dismissed as part of the "liberal press." Yet, in 1972, 80 percent of "the liberal" newspapers endorsed Richard M. Nixon for re-election. I shouldn't have to point out that "Tricky" Dick was never a darling of the left.

We have all seen the right-wing think tank studies that tell us that most media reporters are registered Democrats. These studies are supposed to convince us of the truth of liberal bias. For the most part these studies are old, made at a time when the majority of ultra-conservatives were Democrats (that faction of populist racists, like Jesse Helms, who have since abandoned the Democratic party for the Republican party). In fact, at the time, the large majority of all registered voters were registered in the Democratic Party. Yet Republicans still managed to win the national debate often enough to be elected to public office on nearly an equal basis.

It shouldn't be very hard to figure out that someone's party registration may have very little to do with his overriding beliefs. I know liberals who are registered Republicans, and conservatives who are registered Democrats. Why they do this is not for me to say, but I suspect that each feels that such is the best way to influence their respective affiliations in primary elections. I remember once watching Tim Russert try to prove his lack of bias by claiming that he was not registered either Democrat or Republican, but Independent. Really, Tim? If I go out and change my registration to Republican, will people take what I say here as conventional conservative wisdom?

The simple fact is that the right wing of a right wing party has a nasty habit of accusing any holder of a dissenting opinion of being a little "pink," at the very least. Do you want a recent example? Allow me to introduce to you Senator Jim Jeffords. Senator Jeffords has long been known as a conscientious voice of conservatism. However, in attempting to address the needs of his constituency, he was forced to disagree with much of the Bush agenda. Because of this, he had become so marginalized by the right wing of his own party that he was forced to declare himself independent. Being a right leaning individual, he could not bring himself to join the Democrats. Yet since that day, we have all heard Jim Jeffords called everything from a closet Democrat to an overt socialist by the likes of Tom DeLay and others within his former party's leadership.

Over the past twenty years, a slow but sure dismantling of regulations designed to insure the voices of varying opinions, and to give power to truth, has allowed everything from the impeachment of Bill Clinton to the theft of a presidential election. In that light, what is happening at the Federal Communications Commission may be the most important issue facing America today.

Next week, in Part II, I will discuss the brief history of the covert war against our national discourse, and into whose custody America's microphone has been handed.

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