

The Media, the Internet, and the 2004 Presidential Campaign

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I'd like to start by reading part of an article that appeared last January 9 in a large Boston newspaper. The final few weeks before the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary were upon us, and the reporter who wrote this had attended a Kerry event in Milford, New Hampshire. His article contained this passage:

A year ago at this time Kerry was the prohibitive favorite in New Hampshire, with [Howard] Dean tagged as nothing more than 2004's boutique candidate, à la Bruce Babbitt or Jerry Brown. Now Dean has built up such a huge lead in the New Hampshire polls that Kerry is spending most of his time in Iowa, hoping that a strong showing in the January 19 caucuses there will persuade New Hampshire Democrats to give him another look in their first-in-the-nation primary.

Yet the two-candidate race with Dean that Kerry so desperately wants and needs seems unlikely to materialize. ... [I]t is not beyond the realm of possibility that Kerry could come in third or even fourth in a state where anything other than first or a very close second would almost certainly spell the end of his campaign.

Obviously whoever wrote that story was dead wrong. As we all know, John Kerry's Iowa campaign was in the midst of rising from the ashes even as that article was being published. Kerry finished first in Iowa, first in New Hampshire, and went on to wrap up the Democratic nomination with ease. Thus the article stands as an example of political journalism that couldn't have been more wrong.

If you haven't guessed by now, the person who wrote that article is standing before you. It appeared in the *Boston Phoenix*, the weekly newspaper for which I work. And I offer it up to show you that there are very few journalistic sins out there that I haven't committed myself at one time or another.

The problem with my Kerry story might seem pretty obvious to you, but I think I would define it differently from the way many people would. Some might say that my mistake was in being wrong — by premising my piece about the state of the Kerry campaign on the notion that there was no way he could overtake Howard Dean that late in the nominating process. But, to me, that's not it. I think the real problem with this story was not that I was wrong, but that I was completely wedded to the idea of making a prediction in the first place. In fact, if you think making predictions is a legitimate part of political journalism, then I wasn't wrong at all. My assessment of the Kerry campaign's prospects at that particular moment was entirely accurate. It just wasn't true, or, for that matter, all that important.

Of course, I was hardly alone in predicting Kerry's defeat at the hands of Howard Dean. In late 2003, "The Note" — an online political dope sheet compiled by ABC News that I'll be mentioning several times today — posted something to the effect that it was all over, because no

one had ever amassed as much money and built as large a lead in the polls as Dean had and then gone on to lose the nomination. In early December, right after Al Gore had endorsed Dean, Ted Koppel moderated a Democratic forum at which he essentially had one question for every candidate who wasn't named Howard Dean: *Why don't you stop wasting everyone's time and just get out of the race?* Koppel started by asking each of the candidates if he or she (Carol Moseley Braun was still in the race at this point) thought that Dean could beat George W. Bush, and then focused almost entirely on Dean's commanding leads in the polls, fundraising, and endorsements. Remember, at this point we were still a good month and a half away from a single vote being cast. Finally, Dennis Kucinich — the longest of longshot candidates — delivered a rebuke to Koppel to which all of us in the media should pay careful attention.

"I want the American people to see where the media takes politics in this country," Kucinich said. "We start talking about endorsements, now we're talking about polls, and then we're talking about money. Well, you know, when you do that, you don't have to talk about what's important to the American people." The crowd went wild. As well it should have.

The point of Kucinich's criticism is that politics don't belong to we the media. They belong to we the people — or, as too many in our business understand it, *they* the people, "they" consisting of the great unwashed masses who really don't understand the candidates or the issues and — most important — have *no idea* what they're talking about when it comes to politics. Now, I don't want to get caught delivering some condescending ode to the Noble Voters today. Frankly, their disengagement from politics and public life appalls me. Right up until Election Day, for instance, a significant percentage of the public continued to believe that Saddam Hussein had been involved in 9/11 — even that US forces had found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. I happen to believe that the Bush White House bears more than a little responsibility for subtly promoting those misconceptions. Still, the truth is out there, and it's not hard to find.

But despite such misconceptions, the public is right about one big thing: politics is not an end in and of itself, but, rather, is a means to the end of choosing the government that we want. The media, by covering politics as though it were a sporting event, miss what it is supposed to be all about. Every four years, we tell ourselves that, this time, we're going to do it differently. And every four years, we end up doing pretty much what we always do, for better or worse. Too often, for worse.

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In evaluating how the media covered the 2004 presidential campaign, we first have to agree on what we mean by "the media." As a collective noun that's usually used in the singular, it's pretty meaningless. My own media-consumption habits are about as elitist as you can get. I read the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* every day. I listen to National Public Radio. I'm never home in time to watch the network newscasts, but I'll often watch the first 20 or 30 minutes of CNN's *NewsNight with Aaron Brown*. I read the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic*, *Slate*, and *Salon*, and regularly check a few weblogs that I think are particularly good. And for some ideological balance, I listen to a bit of conservative talk radio, watch chunks of the Fox News Channel, and at least try to be aware of what people are writing for the *Wall Street Journal's* opinion pages and for the *Weekly Standard*.

With a news diet like that, I think I'm fairly well informed. But if your main source of news is one of the three network newscasts — and, with a cumulative audience of as much as 30 million people, depending on what's in the news, they remain by far the medium of choice for most Americans — then you're not going to get political coverage in any depth at all. Rather, you're going to get a campaign rally here, a soundbite there, and a sense that both sides are accusing each other of bad stuff, and you'll be damned if you can quite figure out what that bad stuff is. If you listen to Rush Limbaugh regularly, you'll be misinformed at least as often as you'll be informed. Same with the Fox News Channel, better known as GOP-TV, whose prime-time lineup consists of the noted sex counselor Bill O'Reilly, whose favorite two words are “shut” and “up”; *Hannity & Colmes*, the news equivalent of a professional wrestling match, with the liberals taking a scripted dive at the hands of the conservatives in every bout; and Greta Van Susteren, whose single-minded focus on the Scott Peterson trial is almost enough to make you miss the other shows' relentless attempts to portray George W. Bush as a cross between Winston Churchill and Abraham Lincoln. Well, it's true that Bush and Lincoln share one thing in common: they both oppose the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision.

Now here I'd like to say a few words about the notion of so-called liberal bias in the media, a topic for which mighty forests have been felled and once-healthy vocal cords have been shredded. We've all seen those surveys showing that an overwhelming majority of elite journalists are Democrats, or at least vote Democratic. And I think it's true that most journalists espouse liberal cultural values on such issues as gay and lesbian rights, reproductive choice, and environmental protection. But many of these same journalists are moderate to conservative on such issues as economics, trade, and the role of labor unions. And I also think that the way many liberal journalists earn their bones is by taking down liberal politicians. Bill Clinton was subjected to a relentless, eight-year attack that culminated in his impeachment and near-removal from office. Not a single charge against him was ever proved true except the one that we knew was true all along, and that one might have thought was more a threat to his marriage than to his presidency. And Al Gore, who had exhibited none of Bill Clinton's moral failings, was, if anything, subjected to an even worse thrashing at the hands of the media.

This nominally liberal, functionally nonpartisan mainstream media, meanwhile, is countered by a variety of conservative outlets that aren't so much ideological as they are openly and partisanly Republican: Rush Limbaugh's radio show and other conservative talk shows; the Fox News Channel; the *New York Post*; *Wall Street Journal* editorial page; the *Washington Times*; and others. Their function, in many cases, is to repeat and amplify Republican talking points, challenging and almost embarrassing the mainstream media into taking these talking points seriously. We saw it over and over again with the Bush-Gore campaign in 2000. And despite the rise of explicitly liberal media such as Air America Radio, the dynamic hasn't really changed all that much.

How did this play out in the 2004 presidential campaign? I think that, within the media, the race featured two competing narratives. One narrative was that George W. Bush was seeking re-election — or election, for those of you who haven't gotten over Florida — in a time of war and terrorism. When the Democrats first began running for president, memories of 9/11 were still fresh, and the first phase of the war in Iraq — the “Mission Accomplished” phase, if you will — was just starting to fade away. I think most Americans were still expecting that a stash of nuclear

weapons would be found in one hole in Iraq, and Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein would be found in another. The Democrats themselves were acting more like enablers than like an opposition party, which made it difficult for the media to take a properly skeptical stance toward the Bush administration's claims. As an aside, I would note that the media's rah-rah coverage of the run-up to the war took place at a time when the corporate conglomerates that own much of the media were seeking deregulatory favors from the Federal Communications Commission — chaired by the son of Bush's secretary of state, Colin Powell.

The war narrative led the media to cover the early part of Bush's campaign with great deference — deference that gradually shifted to skepticism when the full extent of the administration's miscalculations, exaggerations, and worse became known. The competing narrative, or maybe the competing idea, was that the Democratic candidates deserved a fairer hearing than Al Gore received in 2000. Thanks to dogged Web critics such as Bob Somerby, who writes the *Daily Howler*, and to books such as Eric Alterman's *What Liberal Media?*, many journalists in the mainstream gradually came to realize that what they had done to Gore amounted to a virtual wilding. We now know that almost nothing we thought we knew about Gore four years ago was actually true. He never claimed that he had "invented the Internet." Instead, he accurately said that he had taken the initiative in convincing Congress to appropriate the funds necessary to expand a small military and academic network called the ARPAnet into what would eventually become the Internet. Which was true, as even Newt Gingrich has acknowledged. Gore never claimed to have "discovered" the Love Canal toxic-waste site. When he said that he and his wife had been models for *Love Story*, it turned out that he was relying on an account in his hometown newspaper that had gotten the story wrong. The list goes on and on. Given how close the 2000 election was, it's probably no exaggeration to say that the mainstream media's willingness to attack Gore over and over again with false Republican talking points — and, in the case of the "inventing the Internet" canard, with their own fake quotes — was responsible for George W. Bush's becoming president.

If the paradigm of the 2000 campaign, as Eric Alterman has observed, was that Bush was too stupid to be president and Gore was too dishonest, in 2004 the paradigm had morphed into something else. This time, stupidity was still the dominant paradigm for Bush, with the horribly planned, disastrously executed, utterly unnecessary war in Iraq standing in as new evidence of Bush's stupidity or disengagement, which I suppose amount to the same thing. Kerry, meanwhile, stood accused not of direct dishonesty, as with Gore, but with indirect dishonesty: he's a flip-flopper, he's indecisive, and besides, he's a cultural elitist who goes windsurfing, speaks French, and has a rich, exotic wife with a strange accent who just doesn't seem as nice as that Laura Bush.

I do think the media managed to exercise greater restraint with Kerry than they did with Gore four years ago, perhaps out of professional mortification over what they did to Gore. But there were moments. Who can forget the summer of 2003, when Kerry — in the midst of blowing his lead to Howard Dean — made a campaign stop in Philadelphia and had the temerity to ask for Swiss cheese on his hoagie rather than Cheez Whiz, the locally acceptable choice? To listen to the outrage over this supposed slight, you would think he had openly mocked the city-council president's plaid sports coat, or had asked "What's that smell?" during a drive past the city dump. Then there was something Kerry supposedly said in what was invariably described as a

hopeless attempt to connect with ordinary people: “Who among us doesn’t like NASCAR?” Why, you’d think he’d said something in French. In fact, there is no evidence that he ever even said it. Thanks to some diligent research by NPR’s Mike Pesca, it seems that what Kerry actually said was, “There isn’t one of us here who doesn’t like NASCAR and who isn’t a fan.” As best can be determined, the snotty “who among us” construct was foisted upon the public by *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, who got it from a casual conversation with a colleague who’d been covering Kerry. Such is the state of ethics — not to mention of so-called liberal bias — at our finest daily newspaper.

Those examples are trivial. A far more important instance of media malpractice came last winter, although in this case the story had an unexpectedly happy ending. The Drudge Report, a conservative Internet gossip site that’s helped advance so many phony stories over the years, as well as a few true ones, claimed that Kerry had had an affair with a young woman while he was married. I guess that goes without saying — if you’re not married, it’s not an affair, right? Anyway, in this case, to its great credit, the vast majority of the mainstream media treated this with rubber gloves and tweezers, even as the British press and a few downscale American outlets whipped themselves into a frenzy. In a few days it became clear that there was nothing to it, and the entire mess quickly faded away. Even so, Kerry was forced to deny the rumor on *Imus in the Morning*. And *Boston Globe* columnist Tom Oliphant, who played a role in fingering the Wesley Clark campaign for helping to spread the story, told me that he thought the whole thing had come within a hair of becoming a national sensation.

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All of this, of course, was prelude for what became the two defining stories of the campaign, at least up until the debates: the relentless attacks on John Kerry’s military service in the Vietnam War by a group of Vietnam veterans calling themselves Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. And the persistent stories that George W. Bush had not fulfilled his obligations in the Texas Air National Guard. The media’s obsession with events that had taken place more than 30 years ago came at the expense of looking at what kind of president Bush had been and what kind of president Kerry would be. But if that was the ground upon which this race was to be fought, the media at least had an obligation to get it right. Instead, the false allegations against Kerry were horribly mishandled, especially by cable television and talk radio, the media of choice for millions of Americans.

First, a few words about Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. Starting in early August, this organization — funded, as it turned out, by Texas Republicans close to the Bush family and to the president’s political strategist, Karl Rove — bought a few ads in swing states alleging that Kerry’s heroic service in Vietnam was largely a concoction. They claimed he had not come under fire when he rescued a man who had fallen overboard, the incident for which he won the Bronze Star. They questioned Kerry’s claim that he had run his swift boat aground, jumped out, and killed a man with a rocket-launcher, the incident for which he won the Silver Star. In fact, they said, the man was an unarmed teenager in a loin cloth. They also questioned Kerry’s three Purple Hearts as though he had not bled enough for their tastes, claiming that at least one of his wounds was “self-inflicted.”

The Swifties quickly became the toast of conservative media, invited to tell their tales on Fox News and talk radio, questioned by friendly interviewers who generally had no idea of truth.

Their charges were spread far and wide, well beyond the small reach of their advertising buy. And as the cliché goes, a lie can travel around the world before the truth can pull its pants on. Fortunately, some elements of the media got to work. In mid-August, the *New York Times* published what may have been the most important story of the entire presidential campaign. I say that because without it, the swift-boat charges may have spun completely out of control. I don't want to review the story point-by-point, but essentially, the *Times* found that not only did the accusations against Kerry contradict the official record, but they also contradicted what all but one of the men who served directly with Kerry said about his service. In some cases, Kerry's critics were contradicting what they themselves had said about Kerry in the past. In one case, an officer who claimed to be with Kerry when he suffered his supposedly self-inflicted wound was almost certainly lying: he had never claimed to be on board before, and two other crewmates of Kerry's swore he was not there. And, in fact, none of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth had ever actually served with Kerry. Of those who had, all but one backed up Kerry's version of events. As the *New Republic* put it in an editorial, believing the swift-boat veterans depended, among other things, on what the meaning of "with" is.

Yet it's as though none of this mattered. I don't like the word "objectivity," because I think it implies a sort of flat-line detachment that is both unnecessary and unhealthy. Why should you trust a journalist whose highest ideal is not to care? But we should try to be fair and balanced, a phrase that used to have real meaning before it became the registered trademark of the Republican propaganda machine. And to be fair and balanced, you have to have a decent respect for the truth. But days and weeks after the *Times* and others had proved that the swift-boat veterans' stories didn't hold up, these liars continued to receive a respectful, even rapturous hearing from some elements of the media. On Fox, folks such as Brit Hume, who should know better, and Sean Hannity, who obviously does not, kept pushing their lies during the Republican National Convention, even as President Bush and Dick Cheney themselves said that they respected Kerry's service. On MSNBC, Chris Matthews was properly skeptical when interviewing the swift-boat vets — yet had done so little homework that he was unprepared when they began lying to his face.

The entire swift-boat fiasco reached its nadir in mid-October, when *Nightline* devoted a half-hour to the veterans' accusations. Interviews conducted in Vietnam showed that Kerry and his supporters had been telling the truth. But when the host, Ted Koppel, interviewed lead swift-boat veteran John O'Neill, he seemed to have no idea that O'Neill was continuing to dissemble. Koppel was so unprepared that he apparently didn't even know O'Neill was lying about what the *Boston Globe* and the historian Douglas Brinkley had written regarding Kerry's Silver Star.

As for Bush's service in the National Guard, we've known since at least the spring of 2000, when the *Boston Globe* first started reporting on the story, that Bush used family and political connections to get both into and out of the Guard. This is really beyond dispute. You don't have to embrace some of the wilder charges — that Bush went AWOL, that he refused to take a physical because he was snorting coke — to understand that he was a privileged young man who took advantage of his position, and that in so doing he avoided having to go to Vietnam.

This was not a story that is near and dear to my heart. It was arguably of some relevance four years ago, when the country was being introduced to Bush. Certainly it was of less relevance in

2004. If Americans don't have a clear view by now of Bush's performance as commander-in-chief, I doubt that learning more details about how he pulled strings in the early 1970s is going to add to that. I understand that Bush's continued evasions — including a false portrayal of his service in his 2000 campaign autobiography — perhaps says something about his character. But, from my point of view, his decision to launch a pre-emptive war against Iraq for flimsy reasons that have not held up says far more about his presidential leadership than his decision to blow off Guard duty when he enrolled at Harvard Business School some 30 years ago.

Nevertheless, for those of us who were appalled by the way Kerry's own military service had come under attack, there was at least some small satisfaction in seeing Bush tormented for his youthful shortcomings. Then, in early September, CBS — the former Tiffany network — glommed onto the story. And that was the end of that. I'm not sure what there is to be said about this that hasn't already been said. Dan Rather and his producer, Mary Mapes, were done in by a few conservative bloggers, who showed that the documents on which they had relied had almost certainly been produced on a modern computer using Microsoft Word, not on a 1970s-vintage typewriter. Now, it's true that some liberal bloggers quickly showed that the documents *could* have been produced on a certain model of IBM typewriter. But the conservatives were right. And within days, the mainstream media — led especially by Howard Kurtz, of the *Washington Post* — had proved that the documents were, indeed, fake, and that CBS hadn't taken even the most minimal of steps to verify their authenticity ahead of time. This failure accomplished three things, all of them invaluable to the Bush campaign.

First, it took the National Guard story off the table. For much of the public, CBS's failure discredited the entire matter of whether or not Bush had completed his Guard service. Walter Robinson, the *Boston Globe* reporter who has done more than anyone to advance this story over the past four years, told me that a respected talk-show host began an interview with him under the misapprehension that the *Globe* had relied on these fake documents as well. If that's what a well-informed person's take on this was, imagine what average members of the public must have thought.

Second, it confirmed every right-wing conspiracy theory about the so-called liberal bias of CBS in general and Dan Rather in particular. An internal investigation into what went wrong continues. Why Rather has been allowed to anchor the evening news, instead of stepping aside in favor of someone who's less of a lightning rod, like Bob Schieffer, is a mystery to me. CBS today is the laughingstock of the news media.

Finally, CBS's failure neutralized the natural advantage Kerry had on the issue of what he and Bush had done in the 1970s. Thanks to the lies of the swift-boat veterans and the bungling of Dan Rather and Mary Mapes, both Kerry's heroic service and Bush's lack of service were equalized in the minds of potential voters. For casual observers of politics — and, after all, those are the people who decide elections — there was something vaguely disreputable about the military records of both men.

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Largely because of the swift-boat veterans and the National Guard story, a disconnect was building between the candidates and the way that the media were covering them. By the end of the Democratic National Convention, Kerry and Bush were more or less tied in the polls, with

Kerry perhaps slightly ahead. By the time that the three presidential debates began, in late September, Bush had pulled ahead by a small but statistically significant margin. Then Kerry and Bush met on the same stage — and a shocked public saw that everything it had been told about Kerry and Bush was false. Far from being a flip-flopping liberal weenie, John Kerry projected strength, answered questions succinctly, and pledged to do everything in his power to protect the country from terrorism. Far from being a firm, decisive leader, George W. Bush was incoherent and petulant, unable even to fill the brief time slots the candidates had been given to answer questions. Bush scowled through the first debate, shouted through the second, and giggled through the third. And, lo and behold, the race moved back into a tie, where it stayed pretty much through Election Day.

In other words, when voters watched Kerry accept the Democratic nomination, at least half of them liked what they saw. And when they watched the debates, a significant plurality believed he had bested Bush. Yet in between, during a period when the campaign was entirely in the hands of the media, Kerry's standing slipped markedly. What does this mean? David Shaw, the Pulitzer Prize-winning media critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, put it this way:

What I think happened in that first debate is that Americans had the chance to see (and evaluate) both men standing and speaking on their own, without the filter of handlers or the news media. Handlers, of course, are supposed to filter, indeed to spin, to obfuscate and exaggerate — to make their candidates appear as attractive as possible and to make their opponents seem as unattractive as possible. That's what they get paid to do.

But the news media are not supposed to obfuscate or exaggerate. They're supposed to illuminate. They're supposed to strip away the filters, counter the spin and give the voters as clear a picture as possible of who the candidates really are and what they really stand for.

What the post-debate shift in voters' perceptions of Kerry ultimately tells me, much as I hate to say it, is that the news media have done a pretty poor job of campaign coverage. If Kerry can so dramatically change how people perceive him in just 90 minutes on television — without benefit of any real knockout punches by him or serious blunders by Bush, without a genuine, confrontational debate format — it suggests to me that the media hadn't fulfilled their responsibility to tell voters what Kerry is really like, what he stands for, what he would do, who he is.

In the days following the debates, coverage of Kerry suddenly took on a more positive cast, as documented by an October 27 study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism. According to the study — a survey of the broadcast and cable networks, national newspapers, wire services, and a few bloggers — more than half of all stories about President Bush were negative in tone during the closing weeks of the campaign, whereas only a quarter of all stories about Senator Kerry were clearly negative. Of course, those who believe in the Great Liberal Media Conspiracy might point to this as evidence of liberal bias. But as the authors of the study observed, Bush enjoyed twice as many positive stories as Al Gore did following the 2000 debates. In both cases — the positive coverage that Kerry received this year, and the positive coverage that Bush

received four years ago — the study attributes that to reaction to how well they performed in the debates.

But as we all know, the media have walked away from the few opportunities they've had to present the campaign unfiltered through their own particular prism. The most notorious example of this was the Big Three broadcast networks' decision to show just three hours apiece of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. I have to say that I wasn't as troubled by this decision as some media critics were. The conventions no longer conduct any actual business, and anyone who genuinely wanted to watch more than three hours could have turned to PBS or cable. But surely two hours a night for each of the four nights wouldn't have been too much for these giant media conglomerates, whose unimaginable wealth derives from their use of the publicly owned airwaves, which they lease for a fraction of their true cost. And if they *aren't* going to offer more than token coverage of the conventions, shouldn't they compensate with some public-service-oriented campaign coverage beyond simply carrying the presidential and vice-presidential debates? By focusing entirely on profit over serving the public interest, the media fail to fulfill their obligations in our democracy.

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I've reached the point where I've pretty much run the course on any overarching argument that I want to make, so let me offer a few random observations about various other aspects of campaign coverage:

- First, this was supposed to be the campaign in which the Internet changed everything. A lot of smart people believed this, and they looked to Howard Dean's campaign as a model for how everything was now utterly different. In fact, Dean and his campaign manager, Joe Trippi, did some brilliant things with the Internet. They raised a ton of money, they empowered Dean supporters by letting them post messages and organize events without adult supervision, and they used MeetUp technology to build early enthusiasm.

In fact, though, the Dean campaign's technological innovations obscured what was really going on. The truth is that Dean's strong antiwar stance, fiscal conservatism, and outsider message were exactly the sorts of things that would appeal to young, technologically savvy, well-educated people who spend a lot of time on the Internet. It wasn't so much that Dean used the Internet as it was that heavy Internet users found him. These days, the vast majority of Americans are online, but only a tiny handful of them *live* online. For most of us, it's just a tool — though an amazingly powerful tool.

When the Iowa caucuses finally arrived, polling by the Associated press showed that Kerry actually got more votes than Dean from people who had used the Internet “a great deal” to obtain news and information about the candidates. The tally was Kerry, 31 percent, and Dean, 25 percent. And this was before “The Scream.” The media's repetitive coverage of “The Scream” has been justly criticized, but let's not forget that Dean's campaign was already in the midst of a meltdown. What the media really missed was that Howard Dean was *never* the frontrunner; rather, he put together the best celebrity candidacy during that period of time when absolutely no one other than a few political junkies were paying attention. And the Internet was one of the ways he did that.

Now, if Internet politics ended up being not particularly compelling, Internet media were something else entirely. But I don't think things were quite what the biggest boosters think, either. The Internet can speed things up, but the notion that the bloggers have taken over the universe is ridiculous. CBS's phony documents were exposed more quickly because of bloggers, but does anything really think they wouldn't have come to light without Little Green Footballs? If that is the case, how on earth were Janet Cooke, Patricia Smith, and Mike Barnicle ever exposed as the frauds they were? *Slate* and *Salon* are wonderful examples of websites that cover politics, but they would be just as wonderful if they were in print rather than online. The best of the bloggers — Josh Marshall, Andrew Sullivan, and Danny Schechter come to mind — are traditional journalists who've simply transferred their skills to a new medium. The Internet is a fantastic development. But don't believe all the hype you read about the so-called blogosphere.

- Second, although it never became a particularly huge issue, I want to say a word or two about the notion of John Kerry's being the most liberal member of the Senate. People in both the media and in politics have repeated this, always attributing it to the nonpartisan political magazine *National Journal*. In the hands of Republicans, this generally morphs into "more liberal even than Ted Kennedy or Hillary Clinton." This characterization isn't remotely true, yet it was repeated over and over and only rarely refuted. As the *National Journal* itself has pointed out, Kerry's ranking as the number-one liberal — and John Edwards as number four — was based on one year, 2003, when both of them missed so many votes because of the presidential campaign that the numbers were completely meaningless. Kerry's lifetime voting record is more conservative than that of 10 other active senators, including Ted Kennedy. Edwards's lifetime voting record is so conservative that it puts him more or less in the same category as Joe Lieberman, a Democrat who could be a Republican. Every time the media either promoted this false factoid or failed to knock it down, they were doing the work of the Republican National Committee.

- Finally — and this is a difficult one because of the cult of objectivity — the media never quite figured out how to grapple with the fact that though the Democrats exaggerate and distort, the Republicans think nothing of outright lying. I suppose I should hesitate to say this — it sounds like I'm nothing but a partisan hack. But I really do believe that something has changed profoundly in our political culture over the past generation, and that it's happened mainly on the Republican side. The Republican Party has become what it claims to despise: a band of moral relativists. Certain types of Republicans believe they can say anything and it really doesn't matter, so long as it furthers their goal of advancing their interests and harming those of the Democrats. When the president denies that his tax cuts have overwhelmingly benefited the wealthy, that's not politics as usual — that's a lie. When Vice-President Cheney tells Tim Russert that he no longer has any financial ties to Halliburton, that's not forgetfulness — that's a lie. And when the White House goes to war, telling the American people that Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction and consorts with Osama bin Laden, that's a lie — a lie for which more than 1100 American soldiers have died, not to mention perhaps as many as 100,000 Iraqi civilians.

Recently, Todd Gitlin wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* in which he criticized that paper's approach. Gitlin's words could apply to much of the mainstream media. He wrote: "The *Times*' decorous approach to the news has often helped President Bush in three significant ways:

by equating his gross deceptions with Mr. Kerry's minor lapses; by omitting or burying news of administration activities and their consequences; and by missing the deep pattern of Mr. Bush's prejudices and malfeasances." I think that gets it exactly right.

Also, Mark Halperin, the political director of ABC News, wrote an internal memo that wound up on the Drudge Report. David Grann described it in the *New Yorker* in a long feature on "The Note," which Halperin compiles. Grann wrote:

Halperin recognizes that it is corrosive for the press to treat a campaign as mere spectacle. On October 8th, he wrote a memorandum to colleagues at ABC that seemed to reflect his ambivalence about the tone of American political coverage. "Kerry distorts, takes out of context, and [makes] mistakes all the time, but these are not central to his effort to win," he wrote. In contrast, Halperin argued, the Bush campaign hopes "to win the election by destroying Senator Kerry at least partly through distortions." He noted, "We have a responsibility to hold both sides accountable to the public interest, but that doesn't mean we reflexively and artificially hold both sides 'equally' accountable when the facts don't warrant that."

I would point out that Halperin, who has never disclosed his political affiliation, is thought by some people to be a Republican. His memo was held up by the right-wingers as an example of liberal media bias, but I think what it really demonstrates is a profound discomfort on Halperin's part with how the game is played these days — especially by the right. The media need to come to terms with this, and to stop pretending that both sides are equally dissembling, equally untrustworthy, equally worthy of contempt.

Not long ago Jon Stewart appeared on CNN's *Crossfire* and unloaded a broadside at its hosts, Paul Begala and Tucker Carlson. I thought Stewart's choice of venue was a bit odd — his *Daily Show* is the hottest political program in the country, whereas *Crossfire* is dying for lack of viewers and ideas. Nevertheless, Stewart's criticism should be taken to heart by the Hannitys and the O'Reillys, by the Russerts and the Matthewses, by everyone who has taken our social, political, and cultural discourse and transformed it into just another opportunity to goose up the ratings.

"Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America," Stewart said. "See, the thing is, we need your help. Right now, you're helping the politicians and the corporations. And we're left out there to mow our lawns. We need help from the media, and they're hurting us. You have a responsibility to the public discourse, and you fail miserably. We need what you do. This is such a great opportunity you have here to actually get politicians off of their marketing and strategy."

It was an amazing and uncomfortable piece of television. Stewart was being more than a little disingenuous — every time the hosts tried to fight back, he essentially threw up his hands and said, "Hey, I'm just a comedian," when in fact he has become a player who's far more important and influential than Tucker Carlson or Paul Begala. But maybe that was his point. We're living at a time when political programs such as *Crossfire* have become so debased, so artificial, that satire such as *The Daily Show* seems far more real.

I've talked quite a bit about "The Note," so let me close with it. On September 10, "The Note" offered an unusually introspective observation: "As long as political reporters — rather than reporters who cover health care, economics, and military affairs — dominate election coverage, there will always be more emphasis on narrative that implicitly celebrates tactical cleverness and bare-knuckles ruthlessness over narrative that celebrates ideas." Maybe this is the real problem. Maybe the reason that politics is covered as though it were a sporting event is that we have assigned the political equivalent of sports reporters to cover it. We predict the political fortunes of John Kerry and George W. Bush as blithely as we do the outcome of the World Series or the Super Bowl. We act as though predicting were an accepted part of the game. And there are absolutely no consequences for getting it wrong, because everyone implicitly understands that what we're doing is not all that important in the first place.

Rather than judging whether the media are doing a good or bad job within the established paradigm of political reporting, we need to re-examine the paradigm itself. Rather than who's up and who's down, who's in and who's out, we need to know who's lying and who's telling the truth, who wants to wage war and who wants to make peace, who is appealing to our basest emotions and who is reaching for something higher and better. Such coverage would force the mainstream media to give up some of their most cherished notions about objectivity, but it would tell us far more of what we need to know. In the end, isn't that what journalism is supposed to be about?

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