

CNN Panders to the Tea Party

Exclusive: Mainstream American journalists have long feared the wrath of the well-organized Right, which targets independent-minded reporters with the damaging label “liberal.” So, the career-minded are quick to bend over rightward, as CNN just did in teaming up with the Tea Party Express, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

CNN, which likes to boast that it’s America’s non-ideological cable news network, revealed in its Republican presidential debate collaboration with the Tea Party Express the hidden political reality behind “centrist” journalism a never-ending pandering to the Right.

The basic truth about mainstream journalism is that the careerists who dominate the national news media are keenly attuned to where the worst career dangers lie and steer away accordingly. And, by far, the biggest risk to a journalist’s career is to be deemed “liberal” by the Right’s powerful attack machine.

So, while CNN would surely recoil from a suggestion that it co-sponsor a Democratic debate with, say, Moveon.org, the “No Bias, No Bull” network saw no problem in associating its journalistic credibility with the far-right Tea Party.

Similar tendencies in the U.S. news media can be noted in everything from the endless fawning over Ronald Reagan’s glorious legacy to the reliably pro-war tilt of most key news outlets, as underscored in an article on Sunday by the New York Times former executive editor Bill Keller. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Who Are These People?”](#)]

Among mainstream journalists, there is almost no career danger from offending the American Left because it is viewed as essentially powerless, lacking any significant media clout of its own.

However, the Right has invested heavily both in building its own media infrastructure and financing anti-journalism attack groups. Together, they boast many scalps, including those of former CBS anchor Dan Rather and his courageous producer Mary Mapes (who broke the Abu Ghraib prison scandal but was undone for a segment questioning George W. Bush’s National Guard record).

So, career-savvy mainstream journalists carefully position themselves so as not to get in the Right’s firing line.

Earning Right-Wing 'Cred'

In that regard, it's useful to have some specific right-tilted story or event to point to, just in case a right-wing critic decides to target you as a "liberal." CNN, which the Right has sometimes smeared as the "Communist News Network," can now cite its collaboration with the Tea Party as valuable right-wing "cred."

When I was working at PBS "Frontline" in the early 1990s, senior producers would sometimes order up pre-ordained right-wing programs such as a show denouncing Cuba's Fidel Castro to counter Republican attacks on the documentary series for programs the Right didn't like, such as Bill Moyers's analysis of the Iran-Contra scandal.

In essence, the idea was to inject right-wing bias into some programming as "balance" to other serious journalism, which presented facts that Republicans found objectionable. That way, the producers could point to the right-wing show to prove their "objectivity" and, with luck, deter GOP assaults on PBS funding.

Similarly, in the 1980s, New York Times executive editor Abe Rosenthal vowed to steer the newspaper back to "the center" by which he meant to the right to counter criticism that the Times' role in publishing the Vietnam War's "Pentagon Papers" and Seymour Hersh's reporting on CIA abuses amounted to "liberal bias."

So, CNN's behavior fits into a larger pattern which has frequently denied the American people the relevant facts and the clear analysis that are needed in a democratic society because to do otherwise would invite devastating right-wing attacks on the journalists.

While such story slanting is unprofessional at all times, this journalistic cowardice is particularly dangerous at times of crisis and war. Yet, it is precisely at those moments when the careerist journalists are most sensitive to the dangers of being smeared as unpatriotic or un-American.

For instance, in the 2002-03 run-up to war in Iraq, CNN and nearly all the major U.S. news outlets became little more than press agents for President Bush, promoting his bogus war rationales almost without question.

When former U.S. weapons inspector Scott Ritter tried to warn the country that Iraq had already gotten rid of its unconventional weapons, CNN's Wolf Blitzer and other media stars challenged Ritter about whether he was a secret agent of Saddam Hussein or whether he allegedly had propositioned an under-aged girl on the Internet.

Ritter, after all, had been marked by the pro-Bush right-wing media as a threat to the pro-war consensus. So, it fell to CNN and other "centrist" news outlets

to demonize him and make him the issue, rather than what turned out to be his truthful information.

Once Bush launched the Iraq invasion in March 2003, CNN like the other U.S. news networks positioned itself as supportive of the "troops," but had a special problem in that it broadcasts internationally and thus required at least a facade of objectivity, unlike Fox News and MSNBC which aggressively pandered to pro-war sentiments.

CNN's solution was to offer startlingly different war coverage to Americans on domestic CNN than what global viewers saw on CNN International. While domestic CNN focused on happy stories of American courage and appreciative Iraqis, CNNI carried more scenes of wounded civilians overflowing Iraqi hospitals.

Ironically, when this divergence was noted in the U.S. press, it was framed as CNN pandering to its international audiences with more negative coverage of the war on CNNI, rather than CNN pandering to an American audience with more jingoistic coverage in its domestic feeds.

The Wall Street Journal observed that CNN had deviated from its approach during the Gulf War in 1991 when there was a unified global feed.

"Since then, CNN has developed several overseas networks that increasingly cater their programming to regional audiences and advertisers," the Journal wrote. Left unsaid was that CNN was also freer to tailor its Iraq War coverage in ways more satisfying to Americans.

Thus, domestic CNN could wax outraged when captured American troops were displayed on Iraqi TV a supposedly gross violation of the Geneva Conventions but CNN saw nothing wrong with having Iraqi soldiers paraded before U.S. news cameras.

CNN and the other U.S. networks also fell over themselves to tell the inspiring story of Pfc. Jessica Lynch, who was captured during the invasion's early days. Her rescue was filmed by the U.S. military in the fuzzy green of night-vision equipment and played over and over again.

Only later was it revealed that Lynch's rescue had been delayed so camera crews could be positioned and that her story of fighting off Iraqi soldiers had been embroidered for propaganda effect. The Iraqi doctors who cared for Lynch said the rescue was staged, a kind of made-for-TV movie that was destined to become a made-for-TV movie.

"They made a big show," said Haitham Gizzy, a doctor who treated Lynch. "It was just a drama" filmed after Iraqi fighters had long fled the scene and with only

doctors manning the hospital.

The Jingoistic Sweepstakes

Still, as hard as CNN tried to show its super-patriotic side and capture ratings from jingoistic Americans it was often outdone by Fox News and MSNBC.

Both Fox and MSNBC broadcast Madison Avenue-style montages of heroic American soldiers at war, amid thankful Iraqis and stirring background music. Left out of these “news” montages and much of the American news coverage were images of death and destruction.

Rather than troubling Americans with gruesome pictures of mangled and dismembered Iraqi bodies, including many children, the cable networks edited the war in ways that helped avoid negativity, boost ratings and give advertisers the feel-good content that plays best around their products.

In more recent years, with Fox News having nailed down the attentive (and large) audience on the Right, MSNBC has experimented with liberal-oriented programming in the evening, albeit having weeded out some of the sharper progressive analysts, such as Keith Olbermann and Cenk Uygur.

The more partisan programming from Fox and MSNBC has left CNN often floundering in third place as it seeks to offer a “centrist” approach, which usually amounts to having a couple of partisans yelling talking points at each other while a CNN anchor ineffectually moderates.

With its new collaboration with the right-wing Tea Party, CNN appears to be reentering the “who-can-pander-to-the-Right-the-most” sweepstakes.

As the New York Times reported, “CNN, the 24/7 cable news pioneer long derided by conservatives as a mouthpiece of the political left, and Tea Party activists, who pride themselves on bucking the establishment, came together here Monday evening for a presidential debate, an unusual display of cooperation between the news media and some of its most hostile critics.

“Each stands to benefit from reaching the other’s following, raising questions about whether the arrangement was a shrewd political transaction masquerading as public service.”

The Times quoted Sal Russo, a Tea Party Express co-founder, as calling the partnership a way for the Tea Party to shed its image as an extremist movement.

“The fact that they’re broadcasting and partnering with us shows that they [CNN executives] understand it’s a broad-based political movement and that it isn’t fractured and narrow,” Russo said.

Though CNN insisted that it maintained its journalistic independence in its Tea Party collaboration, the network widely promoted the debate with banners linking CNN to the Tea Party Express and fashioned the debate as something of a Tea Party rally.

CNN coordinated with Tea Party activists to frame questions and arranged live satellite feeds from Tea Party gatherings in Arizona, Virginia and Ohio, the Times reported, adding that “even the graphics on the video screens behind the stage flashed flags that are often seen at Tea Party rallies.”

In an e-mail alert, the liberal media watchdog group FAIR asked, “Is there really a need for another national cable news channel devoted to promoting far-right elements within the Republican Party?”

With CNN still feeling a need to blunt even the most ridiculous accusations about its supposed left-wing bias, the answer apparently is yes.

[For more on these topics, see Robert Parry’s *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a two-book set for the discount price of only \$19. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth’* are also available there.
