

The American media and the Clinton scandal

Ringmasters of political pornography**Editorial Board**
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For seven months the question of a sexual affair between Clinton and Monica Lewinsky has constituted the political life of the United States, much to the amazement of people around the world, as well as most Americans. Now that the political crisis has reached a certain climax, it is timely to consider one of its central aspects--the role of the media.

From the outset the American media have resorted to the most depraved methods--the term gutter journalism is, if anything, unduly charitable--in an attempt to stampepe public opinion behind the right-wing offensive headed up by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. The entire affair has highlighted the manner in which political life in America is manipulated by the media, which strive by means of lies, sensationalism and appeals to the most prurient instincts to degrade and coarsen the consciousness of the broad masses of people.

It is nothing new for conflicts within the ruling circles in the US to be fought out in the form of sordid scandals. But even by American standards, the recent period has seen a debasement of political discourse to a level that would previously have been considered unimaginable.

Since the media began bombarding the public with gossip about Clinton's affair with Lewinsky, the TV pundits and journalists have competed with one another in packing their 'news' reports with as many salacious tidbits as possible. In the wake of Clinton's August 17 response to Starr's investigation the media grew even more unbridled. They denounced Clinton for not 'telling all' about his liaison with Lewinsky, and supported Starr's counterattack, which centers on publicizing details of the physical relations between Clinton and the former White House intern.

Typical was a report on last Thursday's NBC evening news by White House correspondent Lisa Myers, who announced that Lewinsky's return appearance before Starr's grand jury centered on 'graphic details of sexual encounters.' According to her sources, Myers smirked, Lewinsky told the grand jury the affair was 'not limited to one kind of sex,' and included 'unusual practices.' The following morning's *New York Times* was even more explicit. Parts of its account of Lewinsky's testimony read like a vulgar paperback.

But the degradation of the so-called news is not simply a matter of sexual references. The media responded rabidly to the television address because Clinton, if only in a muted and limited way, called into question the legitimacy of the Starr investigation and sought to appeal to the public, over the heads of the media and the political establishment.

Clinton's opponents within the business and political elite are well aware that the vast majority of Americans remain deeply suspicious of Starr and oppose his witch-hunting methods. They fear any attempt to rally the public and expose the reactionary political forces behind Starr. The media's response to such a danger is to crank out even more filth, with the aim of smothering the critical faculties of the population.

Of course, when the more fundamental interests of American capitalism are at stake, as in last week's missile attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan, the media turn on a dime and regurgitate uncritically the far-fetched and unsubstantiated claims of the same president they had just denounced as a

liar.

The supposed pillars of American journalism--the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the broadcast networks--have not only reduced political reportage to retailing the latest allegations of illicit sex, they have made it a common practice to present reactionaries with ties to outright fascist and racist elements as legitimate authorities on questions of morals, politics and law. The *New York Times*, for example, has taken to prominently quoting Theodore Olson and his wife, Barbara. The August 21 issue of the *Times* features an extensive column headlined 'Is It Only About Sex?' which purports to give the views of a cross section of authorities on the merits of Starr's inquiry. The first opinion is that of Mr. Olson, who is described simply as an assistant attorney general under Ronald Reagan.

The *Times* does not inform its readers that Olson is a long-time friend and former law partner of Kenneth Starr, and was on the board of directors of *American Spectator*, the right-wing magazine financed by Richard Mellon Scaife that has been largely devoted to publishing anti-Clinton articles. (*American Spectator* launched the Paula Jones case with its December 1993 article claiming that Clinton, while governor of Arkansas, used state troopers to procure sex. The article was subsequently repudiated by its author.)

Nor does the *Times* note that Olson, according to a recent article in the British *Observer* newspaper, was present at the founding meeting of the Arkansas Project. This group was established by right-wing forces with ties to white supremacist elements in Arkansas. With the financial backing of Scaife, it has dedicated itself to destroying the political career of Clinton.

For all the seediness of those directly involved, however, the debasement of the 'news' is not simply a matter of the subjective predilections of reporters and journalists, or even the media moguls who pay them. It is more fundamentally an expression of an objective phenomenon--the extraordinary political disorientation and intellectual decline within the American establishment.

This phenomenon has several sides. The base methods of contemporary journalism are bound up with a definite political outlook. Just as the style is the man, the methods employed by the media reflect their reactionary orientation, which by and large coincides with the political agenda of Clinton's opponents within the corporate and political establishment.

These politics are, moreover, bound up with another phenomenon--the ever-greater concentration of all forms of mass communications in the hands of a few gigantic corporations. The major television networks are owned by five economic behemoths--Disney (ABC), Westinghouse (CBS), General Electric (NBC), Time Warner (CNN) and the Murdoch empire (Fox). A similar process is far advanced in regard to radio, the cinema and the print media.

The growing monopolization of mass communications is itself an aspect of the general disconnect between the business and political establishment and the masses of the American people. Never in history has the political system been so removed from the concerns of the general population. The

major parties, quite openly the instruments of corporate power and private wealth, rest on the narrowest bases of active support. The masses of people are alienated, angry and disillusioned with the entire political setup, which is itself increasingly removed from any residual connection to democratic ideals.

In such an extraordinary environment, the most reactionary forces are able to wield influence far out of proportion to their real base of support in the population. As a general rule, periods in which political reaction predominates are periods of cultural and intellectual decline. They bring forward the human material that best articulates their retrograde and intellectually stunted outlook.

Ignorance, superficiality and cynicism are the hallmarks of all that passes for news and analysis in the American media. One looks in vain for the slightest indication of a critical attitude to events. Why certain developments--such as a political crisis that threatens the presidency--take place, or what their broader implications might be--such questions are a closed book. The level of thought barely rises above the elementary stage of immediate sense perception, which may account, in part, for the fixation with things physical and sexual.

What does the prominence of media stars like Chris Mathews, the host of cable TV's 'Hardball' program, who is incapable of speaking at less than a shout, or ex-sportscaster Keith Olbermann, who hosts the nightly chatter on the Lewinsky affair on one of NBC's cable channels, say about the character of the present period? Watching these people, and the scores just like them, one wonders if they have ever read a book. Not one of them exhibits a trace of an understanding of what it means to make a serious political analysis.

Just a few generations ago it was still possible to find in serious American newspapers examples of genuine political analysis. Walter Lippmann, the dean of bourgeois liberal journalists, was a man of intelligence, notwithstanding his generally conservative views. He was a figure of some learning who had an acquaintance with the great ideas of modernity.

It is all but impossible to name a single writer in any of the major American newspapers of today about whom one could say the same. With only the rarest of exceptions, the outpourings of the columnists of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, etc. never rise above the banal. Nor do they give any indication that the author is guided by a conscientious, honest and independent approach to events.

Even if one considers the most prominent representatives of the broadcast news media, the decline that has occurred over the past several decades is obvious. One need only compare such TV newsmen of the past as Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite and Eric Sevareid--without exaggerating the limited achievements and stature of these men--with the present-day crop of Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, Tim Russert and Sam Donaldson, to be struck by the intellectual decay.

Europe has by no means been exempt from the erosion in intellectual standards. Nevertheless the contrast between its news reportage and that of the US is stark. In Europe it is not uncommon for programs of several hours' duration to be broadcast on important issues, and political leaders are required to speak at length on such questions. Foreigners traveling to the US are often amazed and appalled at what passes for news, where an 'in-depth report' means a 90-second salvo, as distinct from the sound bites that constitute the rest of the day's reporting.

The American media exhibit an extraordinary concern that all discussion of political questions be confined to a prescribed framework. On any given evening one can click from channel to channel and hear virtually the identical phrases from the mouths of interchangeable nonentities, who, for some unexplained reason, are deemed 'experts.' They are incapable of adopting a critical attitude toward events, and are determined that no one else should do so.

Those rare exceptions, journalists who work for the major news outlets

and retain a commitment to investigating and reporting in a conscientious and truthful manner, are increasingly being singled out and purged. It is significant that in the midst of the media frenzy over the Lewinsky scandal, CNN retracted a documentary exposing the US military's use of nerve gas during the Vietnam War and fired the two journalists who produced it.

The universal attitude of the media pundits to the opinion polls published in the aftermath of Clinton's August 17 television speech is highly instructive. It is a telling illustration of the enormous gap between the received wisdom of Washington insiders and political experts and the thinking of the broad masses of people. It is also a demonstration of the thoroughly dishonest methods of distortion and manipulation which characterize the presentation of the news.

Once again, as has been the case throughout the Lewinsky scandal, the polls have confounded and enraged the media crowd. They declared Clinton's speech a disaster. He was insufficiently contrite, i.e., he failed to grovel before 'Judge' Starr.

Yet the polls suggest the opposite. Even Clinton's timid criticism of Starr struck a chord with the public. The approval ratings for Clinton's performance in office, if anything, moved higher; his personal approval rating dipped only slightly; a large majority opposed impeachment or resignation; and nearly two-thirds of those polled said they wanted the Starr inquiry to end. Starr's approval ratings, on the other hand, remained somewhere in the teens.

There is, of course, a vast difference between such sentiments and a politically conscious opposition to the right-wing conspiracy that underlies the Starr investigation. They do, nevertheless, indicate a healthy disgust with the sex mongering of Starr and the media, and a strong sense that the independent counsel's vendetta is inimical to democratic rights.

The pundits, who normally cite opinion polls as an unimpeachable authority, have either ignored the polls entirely, or reported only the indices that show a weakening in Clinton's position. The *New York Times* published a commentary on the disjunction between the polls and the reaction of the 'experts' to Clinton's speech, and stated quite brazenly that the media would escalate its assault on public sensibilities until they obtained the poll results they desired.

The resistance of the public to the propaganda offensive of Starr and the media to this point is a hopeful sign. It shows that the public, as distinct from the political pornographers in the media, has not lost its sense of shame. But a breakup of the foul and stagnant environment of American political and intellectual life will only come when the broad masses of working people begin to move into struggle on the basis of their own independent program, against both big business parties and the entire corrupt and anti-social political establishment.

The media's debasement is one important indication that this establishment is entirely unprepared for the consequences of the economic, social and political crisis which is gathering strength, and creating an immensely combustible situation. The media are doing their best, moreover, to make sure that the whole of American society is unprepared for what is coming.

All the more critical is the role of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which provides on an international scale not only a political alternative to the reactionary agenda of capitalist governments, but that which the bourgeois media cannot provide--a serious analysis of contemporary political, social and cultural developments.

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