

The US media: a critical component of the conspiracy against democratic rights—Part 1

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This is the first in a series of articles discussing the role of the American media. The next part will appear December 7.

The American media, and in particular the broadcast media, are playing a deplorable part in the ongoing post-election crisis. Their essential role has been to disorient, manipulate and degrade public opinion and conceal the critical political issues from the US population.

In the liberal print media certain voices have registered concern about the attempt by the camp of Texas Governor George W. Bush to usurp power and pointed to the implications of this effort for political life in the US. These voices are relatively isolated and they speak largely without confidence that their message will bring the process to a halt. None of them speak forthrightly about the takeover of the Republican Party by extreme-right elements or the incapacity of desiccated liberalism incarnated in Al Gore and the Democratic Party to put up a serious fight.

But even this generally timid response has been beyond the reach of the major network and cable television commentators, those with intellectual pretensions and vulgar, right-wing demagogues alike. The intellectual pollution represented by nine-tenths of US television, newspaper and radio journalism is a significant social phenomenon. The American public has access to unprecedented quantities of information, or, more accurately, it is bombarded as never before with the offerings of the media outlets. Twenty-four hour news stations on television and radio have proliferated; reports on developments are available increasingly in “real” time on the Internet. The potential contained in the technology is virtually unlimited.

The reality of private ownership and corporate monopoly control of news distribution, however, has not led to a more informed and involved public. On the contrary, by any objective standard, the overall result of this whirl of repetitive and superficial information and opinion has been a decline in intellectual and cultural life and a sharp increase in popular alienation and disaffection.

This is the first in a series of pieces that will attempt to answer several questions: Why do the American mass media play such a foul role? Who are the major personalities? Who owns the media? What is their modus operandi?

The television networks have been part of the effort to suppress the democratic will of the population since election night. The individual directing the Fox News Channel decision desk, John Ellis, who was instrumental in first declaring the Republican candidate the winner in Florida and the entire nation, is a first cousin of Bush and brother Jeb Bush, the governor of Florida. The other networks quickly followed Fox's lead the night of November 7-8. Ellis, as we now know, was in

constant contact with his cousins throughout the night. Fox's call was subsequently withdrawn, but the push to have Bush anointed the next president of the United States seriously began at that moment. The filthiness has not let up since, and not only at the Rupert Murdoch-owned cable network.

It is obvious by now that the presidential election in Florida was the occasion for widespread fraud and vote suppression. In various ways the voice of the least privileged sections of the population was diminished and their votes undercounted. In some cases, as in Palm Beach County, Democratic Party indifference and incompetence played a significant role. In Duval County, thousands of ballots in black precincts ended up being thrown out because inexperienced voters were given no assistance by election officials. In other areas, police road blocks were set up near polls to intimidate voters. In Seminole and Martin counties, Republican officials were permitted to alter absentee ballot applications. Ballot boxes are reported to have disappeared in Miami-Dade County.

The full story may never come out. The very fact that the punch card system, which is notorious for undercounting ballots, is still used primarily in poorer neighborhoods reveals the essentially undemocratic character of the US electoral process. Not only are the wealthy more likely to have the time and opportunity to vote, but there is a greater likelihood that their choices will be registered.

Has any media personality drawn together the various reports of fraud and intimidation and presented an all-sided, realistic picture of voting in Florida, or anywhere else in the country? Has any major figure in the media registered a protest against the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands? In both cases, the answer is no.

The thrust of the media coverage has been, on the contrary, that the system is working well, and that contentment reigns. Those who have protested or threatened to, like Jesse Jackson—who was far more concerned with smothering the flames than fanning them—have been vilified, accused of “race-baiting” and “class warfare.” Everything has been done to lull the population to sleep, to deflect its instinctive suspicions, to allay its fears.

Were there genuinely “free” mass media in America, i.e., television networks and widely read newspapers that did not operate for profit and at the behest of profit-makers, they would direct the public's attention to several extraordinary facts and keep it focused there: the governor of Florida, who presides over the electoral apparatus, is George W. Bush's brother; the official charged with certifying the controversial vote count was Bush's state campaign co-chairperson; Bush lost the popular vote across the country by a third of a million votes. If the situation were reversed, for example, and Bush had won the plurality of votes, how often would we be reminded of it?

The failure of the media commentators to point out these and other striking features of the Florida and national election does not simply result from a desire to conceal pertinent facts. The corruption, insularity and incestuous relations one finds within the political establishment, both its Republican and Democratic wings, find a full-blown reflection in the media. The politicians and media types belong to one and the same wealthy and predatory social layer.

The accusations of unfairness and wrongdoing in Florida are widespread. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has been gathering affidavits from alleged victims. Surely, even if a television network news department felt the claims were likely to be exaggerated or untrue, it would have the responsibility of investigating them. Yet this has not been done in a serious manner. The television networks operate on the premise that if they fail to comment on an issue or drop it after perfunctory treatment, it ceases to exist.

The attitude of television commentators towards the population as a whole is one of disdain. Years ago, in a discussion of events in Haiti, it was pointed out to Robert Novak, syndicated columnist and co-host of CNN's *Crossfire*, that more than 60 percent of the population of that small country had voted for the allegedly "leftist" Jean-Bertrand Aristide. "Oh," Novak replied, "that's just the riff-raff!" Novak holds the mass of the US population in the same regard, and he reflects an outlook that is widespread. Many in the media and political establishment, particularly in the aftermath of their failure to stampede public opinion over the Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal, have drawn the conclusion that the American people are immoral, selfish and unworthy. Whether broad masses vote or whether their votes are counted is at best a matter of indifference to them, in fact, they are generally hostile to the prospect.

This built-in hostility to the aspirations of the population has taken the form in the past several weeks of covering up the conspiracy against democratic rights involved in the attempt by the Bush camp to seize control of the White House. There is a division of labor among the television commentators. Murdoch's Fox News Channel is stocked with out-and-out right-wingers: former speech writers for Ronald Reagan and George Bush, former assistants to Richard Nixon and Newt Gingrich, columnists and editorial writers from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Post*. The "news" on Fox is often undiluted right-wing propaganda. More common on the other networks, however, is a fairly sophisticated slanting of the news to suppress essential issues and manipulate public opinion.

The most striking feature of American television news programming is its extremely circumscribed character. The US is a nation of nearly 300 million people, one of the most diverse on earth. Yet a relative handful, perhaps several dozen individuals, dominate news presentation and commentary, and their ideas fall within a narrow range. The "free exchange of ideas" takes place between people all of whom defend the profit system, the two-party monopoly of political power and the defense of America's "national interest" around the globe.

The same small circle of experts and pundits, who have nothing original or perceptive to say, seems endlessly to make the rounds of the cable television talk shows. How many times, on a weekly basis, is the viewing public obliged to sit through the reactionary pieties of ex-Reagan cabinet member Bill Bennett, whose entire personality, to paraphrase the American novelist Philip Roth, is dipped in sludge, or the banalities of a Doris Kearns Goodwin or a David Gergen, or the ranting of right-wingers such as Barbara Olson or Ann Coulter?

The news anchors and leading figures of the television networks are not working reporters, struggling to get the truth out. These are individuals with a deep stake in the political and economic status quo, including of course the continued health of the stock market and corporate earnings. Their salaries alone amount to millions of dollars a year (the news anchors average \$5-10 million). They are prominent members of the establishment, who are called upon at any moment of crisis to put the case for the existing political set-up. These media personalities belong to an exclusive social milieu, whose concerns and demands are light-years away from the problems of masses of Americans. The indifference and insensitivity to democratic principles start here.

Whether it be ABC's Ted Koppel (estimated annual salary, \$8 million) complacently asking Democratic Senator John Breaux of Louisiana when he thought it would be time for the Democrats to pack it in, or MSNBC's Brian Williams noting that a Gore legal victory would mean the vice president being "awarded the presidency, in effect, in court," or Fox endlessly asking "Is the Gore camp losing steam?," the viewers confront individuals and organizations that barely conceal their contempt for democratic principles.

Accommodation to the right wing is the method of operation of television personalities, including the so-called liberals. Actions that would produce outrage in other countries, or perhaps merely howls of laughter (like the roles of Katherine Harris and Jeb Bush), are passed off as perfectly normal and acceptable. The media offer no challenge to any allegation made by the far right, no matter how ridiculous, nor to any maneuver of this element, no matter how sordid and transparent. Is it possible to imagine a single one of the major media figures standing up to the neo-fascists of the Republican right, or even seriously criticizing their activities?

We already have the example of the television networks' response to the riot stage-managed by Congressional Republicans outside the deliberations of the canvassing board in Miami, which helped in shutting down the recount in that county. First, the television news programs downplayed and minimized it. Brief video clips were aired, with bland commentary. When the episode proved impossible to gloss over entirely, they broadcast Republican denials of wrongdoing without comment. The incident was permitted to fade from public view. Very few people in the US would have been able to gather from the networks' coverage that a sinister event had taken place—perhaps the first time that a right-wing mob had intervened to effect the outcome of a presidential election.

We are convinced that, in the long run, the American public will prove to have an excellent memory. Despite all the confusion and difficulties arising from the trials and tribulations of history, political realities will make themselves felt and become the basis of new social upheavals. The liars, cynics and highly-paid prostitutes who make up the vast majority of the mass media will not be forgiven for their role in concealing the truth from the population.



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