

The US media: a critical component of the conspiracy against democratic rights—Part 2

An evening of television news

David Walsh

7 December 2000

Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4 | Part 5 | Part 6 | Part 7

This is the second in a series of articles discussing the role of the American media. The first part appeared on December 5. Part 3 will be posted December 11.

The United States is in the midst of a profound political crisis. For the first time in more than a century, a presidential election has produced no conclusive result. The country, as evidenced by the November 7 vote, is deeply divided. The winner of the national popular vote, Democrat Al Gore, has been on the defensive since election night. There is an obvious effort under way by his Republican opponent, George W. Bush, in league with the Republican apparatus in Florida, presided over by Bush's brother, to block an accurate count of the votes. Evidence exists of widespread irregularities and outright fraud. The issue squarely posed by the present crisis is: Will a US president, for the first time in modern history, be installed by anti-democratic means?

Within this complex and explosive situation, it is reasonable to ask: what is the role of the primary purveyors of information, the mass media?

The part played by the media in the impeachment drama of 1998-99 should be borne in mind. In that crisis the television networks and major newspapers functioned by and large as unofficial arms of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, spreading prurient gossip and unsubstantiated allegations, sensationalizing trivial episodes and, in general, seeking to whip the American public into a frenzy over a sex scandal. They did their best to promote the attempt by right-wing Republican forces lined up behind Starr to effect a coup d'état. Have the media been chastened in any way by that experience?

In the evening hours four cable television networks—CNN, CNBC, MSNBC and Fox News Channel—present nothing but news programming and talk shows dedicated to current political events. One recent evening's viewing (November 29) revealed the following picture.

6 p.m.

Until eight o'clock CNBC devotes itself primarily to business news and the general health of Wall Street and the stock market. This is no small matter to those in the news business. CNBC's owner is General Electric, CNN's is Time Warner, MSNBC is co-owned by NBC/General Electric and Microsoft, and Fox News Channel belongs to Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.—all giant conglomerates. The presenters and reporters of the news are themselves wealthy people, most or all of whom have stock portfolios that require constant attention.

On CNN's *World View* the political manipulation begins. Senior analyst Jeff Greenfield presents a segment that poses the question: what if this close and contested election had taken place in another era? Greenfield complacently observes how fortunate it is that the 2000 election has taken place under conditions of internal and external stability. There are “no worries” and “no crisis,” he suggests.

Nor is there any restlessness within the US population, which is why it responds “without a sense of passion” to the events. Because of the “relative contentedness” of the American people, they are responding as “disinterested” spectators. If such an election had taken place during the Depression or in the late 1960s, Greenfield asserts, it might have had significant political consequences.

Confronted with such banalities, one always wonders whether it is self-deception or the desire to deceive others that is principally at work. No doubt among Greenfield and his media colleagues, who have grown extraordinarily rich in recent years, “contentedness” does reign. He can't imagine why anyone would be “restless.”

Even taking these factors into consideration, one cannot help but ask how it is possible for a “news analyst” to expound with a straight face on the tumultuous events of the past several years—from impeachment to the present election crisis—and conclude they have no deeper significance: that there is no connection between a period of unbridled political warfare and the health or sickness of the society at large. Greenfield, one can only surmise, receives his large salary not to *analyze*, but to *anesthetize*.

On Fox, unabashed political reaction reigns. Brit Hume, the former chief White House correspondent for ABC News and a man known for his ultra-conservative views, hosts an hour-long news program. Hume introduces a segment that purports to look at the manual recount in Florida's Broward County. “Some people are pointing fingers” at Democratic Party officials, the voice-over says ominously. Republican claims that officials are bending and manipulating ballots—in front of observers from both parties, it should be noted—are passed along to the viewer. “I think it's illegal,” one Republican operative remarks.

Later in the hour Hume will host a discussion that includes Fred Barnes, executive editor of the Murdoch-owned *Weekly Standard*, and Morton Kondracke, currently executive editor of *Roll Call* and once of *The New Republic*. This duo, who often pop up together on Fox, are among the least appealing of television personalities. Kondracke is vaguely hawk-like, with a glittering stare, while Barnes reminds one of billionaire and would-be Republican presidential candidate Steve Forbes, if the latter weren't so obviously mentally and emotionally off-kilter.

Hume and company purport to rebut various charges made by Vice President Al Gore in one of his public addresses. Gore had spoken of “organized intimidation,” referring to the Republican riot in Miami that helped close down the manual recount. Was there any such intimidation? “No,” proclaims Barnes. The board was “not intimidated,” says Kondracke. This in the face of widely circulated reports detailing the event and gloating comments by Republican supporters boasting of their success. Barnes-Kondracke-Hume's proof that there was no intimidation? The Miami-Dade canvassing board members denied there had been any.

This assertion, strictly speaking, is not true. Canvassing board member

David Leahy acknowledged that the pro-Bush protests had played a role in the decision to stop the recount. Without the disruption, Leahy said, "Speaking for myself, we'd be up there counting." Moreover, if the board members were seeking to evade their responsibility to count the votes, they would have good reason to downplay the role of the Republican rampage in prompting them to call off the tally.

Incredibly, Hume and his guests take CBS's anchor Dan Rather to task for repeatedly referring to Florida's Secretary of State Katherine Harris—co-chair of the Bush campaign in Florida—as a Republican.

The world of American political and media operatives is a small and politically incestuous one. The host of MSNBC's six o'clock program, the *Mitchell Report*, is Andrea Mitchell, wife of Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan. Mitchell speaks to several politicians, including Republican Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Democratic Congressman Richard Gephardt of Missouri and Charles Rangel of New York.

Typical of the supine posture of the Democrats, both Gephardt and Rangel sound a similar theme: the political danger involved in installing a Bush administration that is not considered legitimate. Gephardt points out that some clever journalist under the Freedom of Information Act is going to count the uncounted ballots in Florida, and if he or she discovers that Gore won, it will be "terrible." Rangel warns that in such an eventuality, "You're going to have a real problem of polarization."

At 6:30 p.m. MSNBC presents *Equal Time*, hosted by a former Democratic Party operative, Paul Begala, and Iran-Contra conspirator Oliver North, the former marine colonel. It is a measure of NBC's commitment to democratic rights that it employs an individual, North, who in the 1980s had a hand in drawing up a secret plan known as Operation Rex, which called for the setting up of internment camps and the declaration of martial law to deal with potential opposition to the Reagan administration's interventions in Central America.

7 p.m.

CNBC and CNN continue to plow through news of the stock market. To the analysis of share price fluctuations considerable time, resources and analytical skills are brought to bear. Here no detail can be overlooked.

The Fox Report with Shepard Smith gives a rightward spin to the news of the day. George W. Bush, Smith intones, has "never trailed for an instant and he's still not president." The segment on alleged ballot manipulation by Democratic Party officials in the Broward County recount is replayed.

On MSNBC Brian Williams presents the news, in particular the ins and outs of the various legal battles. Chip Reid, a particularly slick and cynical reporter, comments on Al Gore's "public relations blitz." Portions of an interview with Gore conducted by Claire Shipman are broadcast. The vice president calls the crisis "a test of our democratic principles" and criticizes the effort to "set aside thousands of votes." He gives the impression of a man who chooses his words carefully to conceal far more than he reveals.

Williams spends some time on George W. Bush's efforts to put together a presidential transition team. Various names are mentioned for potential cabinet posts in a future Republican administration. Reference is made to the role being played by Bush's running mate, Dick Cheney, just out of the hospital after a heart attack. Cheney is "in charge of the transition," he is "more active than any previous vice president ... a major, major player." Williams and his colleagues remain discreetly silent on why Cheney has been dragged from his sickbed to spearhead the Republican public relations campaign, i.e., the generally acknowledged fact that Bush is an intellectual cipher.

Williams continues with former Republican Senator Nancy Kassenbaum (Kansas) and former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton (Indiana). The host asks, "When do you start worrying about what this process [of contesting the election] is doing to the country?" (It ought to be noted that

no commentator in the course of the evening asks what the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands might be "doing to the country.") Kassenbaum and Hamilton respond with banalities about both parties demonstrating "good will." In regard to the evenly divided Senate, Williams provides one of the more inane questions of the evening: "Can't leadership be the tie-breaker?" he asks.

MSNBC concludes the hour with another superficial segment, "Is Image Everything?" The four journalists collected to discuss the issue, from the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New Republic*, the *Washington Post* and the *National Review*, cannot bring themselves to answer "no."

8 p.m.

A number of the foulest programs air at this hour. Chris Matthews, host of CNBC's *Hardball*, has singlehandedly assisted in the coarsening of public discourse. Matthews' interviewing technique involves shouting at his guests and the television camera throughout his program. His mouth never closes, one has the impression, even during those brief, merciful moments when his guests are speaking.

Hardball is shrill, superficial and virtually unwatchable. Afterward, almost nothing is memorable except the high-pitched, almost hysterical tones. It's like a session with a particularly insensitive orthodontist. The host, on the other hand, calls it "clean, aggressive [and] Machiavellian."

Born in Philadelphia, the son of a court recorder, Matthews—who unsuccessfully ran for Congress in 1974—worked for Democrat Jimmy Carter as a speech writer after the latter's election as president in 1976. When Carter lost the 1980 election, Matthews went to work for Tip O'Neill of Massachusetts, the Democratic Speaker of the House. O'Neill was a thoroughly corrupt politician, but Matthews makes clear in interviews that he considered it his job to push the Speaker to the right, away from "tax-and-spend" liberalism. Matthews later worked for the *San Francisco Examiner* until the television spot opened up.

Matthews made a name for himself as one of the crusaders against Bill Clinton during the impeachment crisis, lining up with the ultra-right conspirators around Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. Opportunism and careerism, nourished by the virulent anticommunism promoted by the Catholic Church, apparently drove Matthew on.

A *Boston Globe* portrait notes that *Hardball* "rocketed into the ranks of the highest-rated talk shows on cable TV with the explosion of the Monica Lewinsky scandal and with Matthews's relentless rebukes of President Clinton's dalliances and dishonesties. A morally outraged Matthews continued to hammer away at this theme long after the American people were pleading with Clinton critics to halt their harangues."

The *Globe* comments: "He [Matthews] sees himself speaking for 'regular people ... gritty city people.' But his home life—played out in a rambling Victorian mansion in one of Washington's most patrician suburbs—is far removed from the workaday world." His annual salary is in the \$1-2 million range.

This evening's *Hardball* presents a succession of talking heads, including the inevitable Doris Kearns Goodwin, who was there, as always, to discuss the small change of American presidential history. Democratic politicians like Rep. Jerry Nadler of New York and *Chicago Tribune* columnist Clarence Page raise certain issues of democratic rights, but everything of principle is more or less swept away by the smirking and cynicism of Matthews' presentation. For the "left," *Nation* editor Katrina Vanden Heuvel makes an appearance, but a very meek one.

Bill O'Reilly of Fox's the *O'Reilly Factor* is another particularly unpleasant media specimen. O'Reilly, who worked for CBS and ABC for several decades before coming to Fox, is a bully and a sanctimonious lecturer, who proclaims his hatred for "partisanship" even as he proceeds to present a right-wing line on virtually every political question. His technique involves inviting opponents to air their views and then, with great self-satisfaction and unconvincing aplomb, dismissing anything that might contradict his reactionary assertions. In O'Reilly one can see

something of Joe McCarthy and Pat Buchanan.

He has a hobby-horse this evening, one which he's been on about for several evenings. Democratic Party claims of fraud or irregularities in Palm Beach and other Florida counties are ridiculous, because voting machines cannot show bias. "Belief," he pompously informs us, "must be based on something.... Machines say Bush won. Machines don't lie."

Perfect logic, which has the minor defect of leaving out the real world. Punch card systems are still in place in Florida in more than 20 counties, including several large urban areas, where the Democratic Party receives a great deal of support. Punch card systems are notorious for undercounting votes. As a result, tens of thousands of citizens, primarily poorer workers and blacks, were disenfranchised. Any guest, including Curtis Gans of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, who points this out in the course of the hour-long program, is simply brushed aside. "We know all that," O'Reilly says, cutting Gans off.

O'Reilly's favorite gesture involves brushing aside troubling questions. He dismisses former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich's concerns about the voting machines in Florida, as well the latter's worries about the consequences of a Bush victory under the present conditions.

When Lis Wiehl, a University of Washington law professor, notes that the Florida Supreme Court, in extending the deadline for the manual recount, was simply doing what state courts do all the time, i.e., interpret state laws, O'Reilly hurriedly proceeds to the next question. The one guest with whom O'Reilly can truly have a heart-to-heart chat is Sean Hannity, the neo-fascist radio talk show moderator and co-host of *Hannity & Colmes*, the program that follows on Fox.

On CNN Wolf Blitzer hosts *The World Today*. Blitzer, CNN's senior White House correspondent, has an intriguing past. After graduating from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington DC, he went for work, surprisingly, for Reuters in Tel Aviv. As Blitzer himself commented in an interview, "That was my first job ever in journalism. I didn't have any college experience in journalism. I never took a course. I sort of fell into it."

Blitzer later worked as the *Jerusalem Post's* correspondent in Washington. According to his official CNN biography, "He was in Egypt in 1977, covering the first Israeli-Egyptian peace conference. In 1979, he accompanied President Carter to Egypt and Israel during the final round of negotiations that resulted in the signing of the peace treaty. In 1982, Blitzer was in Beirut during the withdrawal of PLO and Syrian forces."

More: "He flew to Moscow shortly after the failed coup in August 1991 and spent nearly a month reporting on the Soviet military. He was among the first Western reporters invited into KGB headquarters in Moscow for a rare inside look into the Soviet intelligence apparatus. He returned to Moscow in December 1991 to cover the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition from Mikhail Gorbachev to Boris Yeltsin. After many years of reporting from the nation's capital ... Blitzer joined CNN in 1990."

Blitzer has covered Bill Clinton since his election in 1992, i.e., throughout the impeachment crisis. He has also conducted exclusive interviews with convicted Israeli spy Jonathan Jay Pollard in a US prison.

Blitzer introduces video footage of angry Florida residents denouncing irregularities and the infamous "butterfly ballot" before a committee of the state legislature. The brief clips of these outraged voters are virtually the only authentic moments during four hours of television viewing. Here, for an instant, one gets a glimpse of the real state of class and social relations in America. One citizen describes the Republicans state apparatus as "no better than thieves."

Nearly all the networks run a selection of the voters' remarks, but in each case the host or news anchor has nothing to say in response. No derision, no hostility, no amazement ... nothing. One suspects they genuinely don't know what to make of the outpouring of popular protest, a social phenomenon they are organically incapable of registering or comprehending.

Blitzer's guest is ex-Reagan cabinet member William Bennett, who is as illuminating as ever. Reasonably enough, Blitzer asks, "Will you accept his [Gore's] presidency as legitimate?" Bennett refuses to answer. Slow-moving, heavy and vicious, Bennett suggests Gore should concede because he is on the point "of looking ridiculous." Bennett criticizes "vague" concepts such as "the will of the people."

MSNBC rehashes the day's news, hosted by Lester Holt. Republican Congressman Asa Hutchinson of Arkansas, one of the House impeachment managers, is a guest. That group of individuals kept a low profile during the election campaign, hated as they were by wide layers of the population. Hutchinson remarks, "Everybody wants their vote counted. Of course that's true," but, he insists, there are rules governing the process and the rules must prevail.

9 p.m.

Rivera Live on CNBC, hosted by Geraldo Rivera, is a hotbed of Democratic Party support, of a kind. Rivera is an opportunist and social-climber and he attracts a certain type, operators of various stripes. The program is less politically reactionary than some of the others, but it exudes an unpleasantly corrupt and cynical odor of its own.

Carl Bernstein, still resting on his Watergate fame, is a guest. He notes that a poll indicates 41 percent of the population considers the Florida vote count fair and 50 percent considers it unfair. He asserts that Republicans privately admit that Gore won more votes than Bush in Florida.

Rivera has Harry Jacobs, the Democratic Party supporter pursuing the case of tampered absentee ballot applications in Florida's Seminole County, as another guest. Jacobs outlines the evidence of illegal actions committed by Republican election officials. He explains that Katherine Harris had instructed canvassing boards to reject all ballots whose applications lacked the information later added by Republican operatives.

Jacobs makes a favorable impression. His seriousness stands in contrast to Rivera's lightmindedness. Bernstein observes that it will be "very difficult for people in this country to ever accept the real count." Richard Ben-Veniste, a member of the Watergate prosecution team, opines that it is important for "the Supreme Court to provide legitimacy."

Larry King, the lowest common denominator of American television—a man, incidentally, who asks \$50,000 for every public appearance—has Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman on his program. Lieberman tells the *Larry King Live* audience that "all we have asked is that the votes be counted," so the next president will have "no cloud over his head." He raises certain legitimate questions of democratic rights and principles, but in a half-hearted way—in the manner of a man who is already preparing to give way. Asked about the next four years, Lieberman says, in a conciliatory tone, "We [Democrats and Republicans] should be able to work together.... We talked about the same issues."

Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona follows Lieberman. He claims that the American people "want to bring it to a close." He goes on: "We don't guarantee a perfect election." McCain indicates that he would decline a cabinet post in a Bush administration. He seems to be playing his cards close to his vest. If Bush loses, of course, McCain has a better chance at the Republican nomination in 2004.

On Fox, the *Hannity & Colmes* program works its way along its natural course. Sean Hannity is a right-wing fanatic, who listens to no one and hears nothing that might deter him. Facts, arguments mean nothing to such people. He browbeats, insults and provokes. One feels he will falsify events at will. Alan Colmes is his liberal partner, supposedly there to act as a counter-balance. The entire program consists of shouting, interruptions, harangues.

Rangel is again a guest, as is right-wing Republican Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen from Florida, Democratic Governor Gray Davis, Congressmen Bill Pascrell (Democrat from New Jersey) and David Dreier (Republican from California). When Pascrell asks Hannity point blank

whether Democrats were present when Republican representatives altered absentee ballot applications in Seminole County, Hannity simply refuses to answer. His response to questions he doesn't care for is a smirk. Establishing the truth is not his interest.

Hannity is a clone of Rush Limbaugh, the ultra-right radio talk show host. Liberalism, to these people, is as much a dirty word as communism. These are practitioners of the big lie, following in a tradition pioneered by Josef Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister. Their motto: say anything and someone will believe it.

On MSNBC Brian Williams is once again going over the day's events. He suggests that a Gore victory would mean that the vice president had been "awarded the presidency, in effect, in court." An extraordinary statement. If a candidate is the victim of fraud and official misconduct, how else is he likely to prevail?

* * *

While there are differences in the coverage, depending on the network and the individual host and guest, the overall impact of these television news talk shows is deadening and disheartening. They don't educate, they manipulate. They don't clarify the political process, they pollute it.

The media personalities presiding over these programs evince almost no interest in the rights and needs of average citizens. Their interest, on the contrary, lies in the continued functioning of the present social system, which offers them such magnificent benefits. They don't operate as investigators of the truth, but as agents of the status quo.

One doesn't feel illuminated by an evening of such programs, but soiled and degraded. A fundamental premise of any politically progressive movement that arises in the US must be the need to reject and expose the role played by the television networks in deceiving the American public on a daily basis.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact