

The US media: a critical component of the conspiracy against democratic rights—Part 3

Television personnel: money matters

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The mass media have played an immense role over the past five weeks in determining the outcome of the crisis that followed upon the unresolved presidential election of November 7. It is unquestionably the case that had leading media personalities evinced an interest in matters of democratic rights and principles, had they raised any serious challenge to the arguments of right-wing politicians and commentators, had they pointed warningly to the biases of reactionary judges, the population would have been in a far better position to confront the attempt by George W. Bush and the Republican Party to usurp power.

This specific context, with all its implications and consequences, underscores the need for the public to understand who these media personalities are and what social interests they represent.

In good faith millions of people watch television programs and read newspapers unaware of the histories and connections of those who present themselves as mere messengers, informing the public of developments as they unfold, or as independent and impartial observers of the social scene. In reality, these “messengers” and “observers” often play an active role in the upper echelons of the society they are ostensibly analyzing with detachment.

How much credibility would most television journalists have, for example, if personal and political biographies and other pertinent facts of their lives, including annual income, were flashed on the screen alongside their faces as they claimed to present an objective presentation of events?

To take one simple example, on December 12 *NBC News'* Justice Department and Supreme Court correspondent Pete Williams was one of the first to appear before a television camera and attempt to decipher the reactionary high court decision that awarded the presidential election to Bush. It would have been helpful if NBC had reminded the public that in 1986 Williams joined the staff of a certain Wyoming Congressman, Dick Cheney, as a press secretary and legislative assistant; moreover, that when Cheney was named Assistant Secretary of Defense in 1989, under George W. Bush's father, Williams was appointed Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. On Tuesday night Williams was not called on to shape the news—that the court ruling was a clear victory for Bush-Cheney was evident enough—but the information might have helped explain his self-satisfied expression.

The relations between the government bureaucracy and political parties and media are highly incestuous. The inhabitants of these realms hobnob with and befriend and marry one another. Witness the union of the State Department's James Rubin and CNN's chief international correspondent Christiane Amanpour; the Federal Reserve's Alan Greenspan and NBC's Andrea Mitchell. ABC's Cokie Roberts is the daughter of Hale Boggs (D-Louisiana), the late House majority leader. Figures like Chris Matthews of MSNBC and George Stephanopoulos of ABC have made the seamless

transition from politics to journalism.

These are privileged, pampered people. They live and dine and travel in style. They squabble and feud and gossip, fall out and reconcile (or don't), but, liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, friends and foes alike, they breathe the same air. These are people, to borrow an apt phrase from F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose voices are “full of money.”

What do the leading television and print journalists earn? Such a question is considered tasteless or “nobody's business”—therefore it must be important. Here's a brief survey, culled from a number of sources (principally the May 1999 issue of *Brill's Content*).

At the top of the list (aside from arch-reactionary radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh and “entertainment” personalities such as the vile Howard Stern or interviewer Barbara Walters) sit the major networks' anchors. Peter Jennings of ABC makes in the area of \$9 million a year; NBC's Tom Brokaw pulls in approximately \$7 million; CBS's Dan Rather, the same.

Other media stars include Ted Koppel of ABC's *Nightline*, who earns some \$8 million annually, and Diane Sawyer of the network's *Good Morning America*, whose salary is \$7 million. ABC's chief White House correspondent Sam Donaldson makes in the range of \$3-3.5 million; the network's substitute anchor, Forrest Sawyer, takes in \$2.5 million a year. Don Hewitt, producer of CBS's *60 Minutes*, earns \$4-5 million; the same program's Mike Wallace, \$3 million. Lesley Stahl, also of *60 Minutes*, reportedly makes \$1.75 million, Bob Schieffer, CBS's chief Washington correspondent and moderator of *Face the Nation*, \$1.5 million.

At NBC, Katie Couric, coanchor of *NBC Today*, rakes in \$7 million a year, while her cohost, Matt Lauer, earns a mere \$2.5 million. In 1998 Jane Pauley signed a five-year deal at NBC for \$5.5 million a year. Lisa Myers, NBC's Washington correspondent and one of the chief Clinton persecutors, makes \$375,000 annually. Larry King of CNN earns \$7 million in salary; Bernard Shaw, also of CNN, \$1.1 million; and Jeff Greenfield, CNN senior analyst, the same. Christiane Amanpour's pay is \$2 million a year. At Fox, Brit Hume pulls in one million dollars a year, while Bill O'Reilly makes slightly less. MSNBC's Brian Williams makes \$2 million annually.

Newspaper editors and leading reporters earn significantly less, but their pay is nothing to sneeze at. Joseph Lelyveld, executive editor of the *New York Times*, for example, makes an estimated \$400,000-600,000 a year. Tom Shales, a television critic for the *Washington Post*, earns \$200,000, and John Brecher, the page-one editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, the same. David Maraniss, national political correspondent of the *Post*, makes a reported \$130,000 annually, while a senior news editor at the *Journal* is believed to average \$160,000 and a senior reporter at the *Times*, \$80-100,000.

These are salaries only. Well-known personalities can boost their

incomes substantially through lectures and personal appearances. In a 1995 article ("Talking for Dollars"), *Washington Post* columnist Howard Kurtz revealed some startling facts. Kurtz noted that Donaldson of ABC—remember this is five years ago!—received \$30,000 per speaking engagement, William Safire of the *Times* took in \$20,000 a speech, Cokie Roberts, \$20,000 as well. Mike Wallace fetched \$25,000 a speech and Larry King received \$50,000.

According to Kurtz, David Gergen, then of the *MacNeil/Lehrer* news program on PBS and a *U.S. News* columnist, earned more than \$450,000 for 21 talks in 1992. "The list of Gergen's benefactors," observed the *Post* columnist, "read like a who's who of corporate America," including the American Stock Exchange, the American Trucking Association, the Snack Food Association, Chase Manhattan Bank and Salomon Brothers.

Gergen, still a perennial on the television talk show circuit, made an uncharacteristically candid admission to Kurtz: "There is a corrupting influence.... You stay at a ritzy hotel. You shut people out. You just talk to these well-groomed, well-heeled business folks. You're traveling in a bubble. It tends to encourage a pro-establishment viewpoint. You're talking to the establishment, you're with them a lot."

At the height of the health care battle during Bill Clinton's first term, a variety of journalists earned fat fees by telling health insurers and the like what they wanted to hear. Fred Barnes, then of *CBS This Morning* and CNN's *Crossfire* (and now executive editor of Rupert Murdoch's ultra-right *Weekly Standard*), declared on television that the notion of a health care crisis was overblown and received an invitation to speak before the American Managed Care and Review Association. At the same time columnist George F. Will, the right-wing snob and social climber, was invited to address the Health Insurance Association of America on the same theme—that there was no health care crisis. Will told Kurtz that his receipt of industry cash "doesn't make a particle of difference in what I'm saying." As an inveterate reactionary, this may well be the case.

But liberals like Michael Kinsley also took industry cash to discuss the health care proposal. Kinsley commented lamely, "It's potentially corrupting, but so is everything."

In a February 1996 article in *Atlantic Monthly* ("Why Americans Hate the Media"), James Fallows noted that ABC's Donaldson announced in 1993 that he wanted to get in touch with the concerns of the average American. Fallows cited Donaldson's comment that "I'm trying to get a little ranching business started in New Mexico," he said. "I've got five people on the payroll. I'm making out those government forms." Fallows continued: "Thus he understood the travails of the small businessman and the annoyances of government regulation. Donaldson, whose base pay from ABC is reported to be some \$2 million a year, did not point out that his several ranches in New Mexico together covered some 20,000 acres. When doing a segment attacking farm subsidies on *Prime Time Live* in 1993 he did not point out that 'those government forms' allowed him to claim nearly \$97,000 in sheep and mohair subsidies over two years. William Neuman, a reporter for the *New York Post*, said that when his photographer tried to take pictures of Donaldson's ranch house, Donaldson had him thrown off his property. ('In the West trespassing is a serious offense,' Donaldson explained.)"

Fallows also took note of George Will's activities. Will had written "a column and delivered on-air comments ridiculing the Clinton Administration's plan to impose tariffs on Japanese luxury cars, notably the Lexus. On the [David] Brinkley show [on ABC] Will said that the tariffs would be 'illegal' and would merely amount to 'a subsidy for Mercedes dealerships.'"

"Neither in his column nor on the show did Will disclose that his wife, Mari Maseng Will, ran a firm that had been paid some \$200,000 as a registered foreign agent for the Japan Automobile Manufacturers Association, and that one of the duties for which she was hired was to get American commentators to criticize the tariff plan. When Will was asked

why he had never mentioned this, he replied that it was 'just too silly' to think that his views might have been affected by his wife's contract." That Will, who has never uttered an original thought in his life, turns out to be a shill for large corporate interests will not, I trust, shock readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Or consider the promotional blitz surrounding the publication of NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*, an homage to the generation that fought in World War II. Jim Neilson, in a 1998 essay in *Cultural Logic*, noted that "Brokaw has twice been on NBC's *Today* show promoting his book (during one appearance host Matt Lauer gushed, 'I mean only to pay tribute to you here and not to embarrass you'...), has appeared on MSNBC, CNBC, the Conan O'Brien show [an NBC talk show], and the online site MSNBC.com, and has seen *Dateline NBC* devote a full hour to his book." No one involved mentioned that NBC itself stood to gain, as the network owned 25 percent of the rights to *The Greatest Generation*.

Neilson further pointed out that "[ABC news anchorman] Peter Jennings's *The Century* was the basis for a twelve part series on ABC and a fifteen-part series on ABC co-owned The History Channel."

All this provides only a tiny glimpse into what is an inbred and thoroughly unprincipled milieu—and more corrupt than the average American could possibly imagine.

The class rift in journalism

Of course, the field of journalism is riven by social division like every sphere of American life. There is an enormous gap between those at the top of the media heap and those at the bottom. A production assistant at CBS News makes \$22,000 a year; at CNN, \$28,000; at Fox, \$20-25,000; at ESPN [the all-sports cable television network], the same. A seven-month "trial" production assistant at ESPN earns \$9 an hour, with no benefits.

Outside the large markets, even on-air television personnel fail to make much money. A reporter/weekend anchor on WREX in Rockford, Illinois, takes in \$23,000 annually. The news director at KXGN in Glendive, Montana, makes \$22,000, and a reporter at KTEN in Sherman, Texas pulls in a princely \$15,000 a year. The local host/producer of Public Radio's *All Things Considered* in Pullman, Washington earns \$25-29,000 a year. A reporter at the *New Haven Register* earns a starting salary of \$26-28,000. An entry-level editorial assistant at *Newsweek* makes \$28,000 and at *The New Republic*, \$20-25,000.

Indeed, according to valuable research done by Vernon Stone, of the Missouri School of Journalism, the gap between "rich and poor" in the media world has widened in recent decades.

Stone notes the situation "in the broadcast news workplace of U.S. commercial TV and radio stations. During the first half of the decade [the 1990s], the highest paid news people moved still higher by outpacing the cost of living. But the great majority of others were able to buy or save a little less than before. They failed to keep up with the Consumer Price Index (CPI)..."

He explains that "Television journalism's top moneymakers—the news anchors, news directors and reporters at stations in the 50 largest markets—saw their salary averages go up faster than the CPI from 1989 to 1994. In the 51-100 middle tier of markets, they still generally kept pace. They fell behind only in small markets (101-210). Similar trends are indicated for 1994-99.

"TV stations' lowest paid news staff, photographers, kept pace with inflation in the 50 largest markets, but lost ground elsewhere. Likely ditto going into 2000.

"Next lowest paid as they move up, producers and assignment editors typically saw their paychecks lose buying power in all TV market categories from smallest to largest in 1987-94. Some stations remedied this during the next five years, but most probably did not.

"In radio on average, news directors and anchors at major-market

stations gained on the Consumer Price Index. But in the many, many radio markets of less than a million population, buying power generally went from bad to worse in 1989-94.”

Stone goes on to say that “the salary gap between the high and low paid keeps getting wider—at a rate faster than the normal widening to be expected from across-the-board percentage gains.

There are those who enter the profession of journalism out of the desire to inform and educate, to challenge conventional wisdom and offer social criticism. Such individuals do not rise to the top. Theirs are not the faces one sees on the evening news and talk show programs.



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