

Salon and the decay of American liberal journalism

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Salon, one of the best-publicized online magazines, has plunged into a financial crisis which could lead either to its demise or its takeover by some media conglomerate. The company's stock price has crashed from \$10 a share in 1999 to barely 30 cents today, with the threat that the stock could be delisted on Wall Street if the price falls any further.

The financial hemorrhage has been severe. *Salon* presently employs 80 people, down from 150 at its height. Its total revenue in the most recent quarter was \$2.3 million, less than 20 cents per reader per month, if the claim of 3.6 million monthly readers is accepted. (Industry analysts at Jupiter Media put the readership at a considerably lower figure, 1 million a month.)

The online magazine has taken a series of emergency actions to stave off financial collapse. It introduced a premium edition last month, with a monthly charge of \$30 to subscribers who will receive exclusive access to a mix of political commentary and soft-core pornography. Publisher David Talbot is reportedly peddling the web site to potential corporate purchasers.

The crisis is part of the general collapse of the dot-com bubble. But it cannot be attributed solely to the puncturing of this speculative frenzy. There are wider implications related to the perspective on which the publication is based and the social layers to which it appeals.

The online magazine was launched in 1996 by Talbot and a group of fellow journalists mainly from the San Francisco *Examiner*—the Hearst-owned daily newspaper—with the reported financial assistance of Apple Computer pioneer Steven Jobs. *Salon* professed to represent a combination of left-liberal politics and iconoclastic cultural attitudes, characteristic of the middle-class radical milieu that developed in the 1960s, most strongly centered in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The lack of either journalistic or political principle characteristic of the ex-radical milieu that spawned *Salon* became apparent during the Clinton impeachment crisis, when the web publication first came to widespread public notice. *Salon* aggressively criticized the anti-Clinton campaign, and published some valuable material on the network of right-wing operatives that extended from white supremacist elements in Arkansas to Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

However, in the fall of 1998, when the Republican-controlled House of Representatives moved towards impeachment, *Salon* published an exposé of the personal sexual conduct of one of the leading congressional Republicans, Henry Hyde, the chairman of

the House Judiciary Committee who spearheaded impeachment and led the House prosecutors in Clinton's trial before the Senate.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, <http://www.wsws.org/news/1998/sep1998/lib-s19.shtml> such scandal-mongering was no substitute for an analysis of the political implications of impeachment. We wrote, "this episode illustrates the difference between the outlook of a liberal publication, oriented to a middle-class and bohemian milieu, and the outlook of the *WSWS*, which is based on socialist principles and oriented to the political education of the working class."

It was true that the Republican posture of outrage over Clinton's lies about sex was hypocritical in the extreme. But the primary issue in the impeachment crisis was not sexual hypocrisy, but the threat to democratic rights inherent in the attempt to overturn the outcome of two national elections by the methods of a backroom coup d'état.

Salon published an editorial defending its decision to publish personal information about Hyde: "Aren't we fighting fire with fire, descending to the gutter tactics of those we deplore? Frankly, yes. But ugly times call for ugly tactics."

Salon evidently shared the belief of Matt Drudge, the right-wing Internet gossip-monger who helped make public Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, that revelations of private sexual behavior would shift public opinion. But the public reaction to the Lewinsky affair, the 450-page Starr report filled with salacious detail and the videotape of Clinton's grand jury testimony indicated a healthy distrust of the attempt by the right wing to use a sex scandal to seize political power.

Salon quickly cashed in on the notoriety it achieved from its revelations concerning Hyde—at one point House Republican leader Tom DeLay blustered publicly about a congressional investigation into the web publication. A few months after the impeachment drive ended in the Senate vote to acquit Clinton, *Salon.com* went public in an initial public offering that raised \$23.6 million on the stock exchange.

The influx of cash was accompanied by a steady shift to the right in the online publication. Typical was a July 10, 1999 diatribe by news editor Joan Walsh against the campaign for death row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. Walsh wrote, "The Mumia cult sickens me like little else in American politics today."

Apparently poverty, social inequality, racism, and the institution of capital punishment did not spark equal revulsion in Ms. Walsh, to say nothing of the international crimes of American

imperialism—this commentary being published only a few weeks after the American bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, which *Salon* supported.

In the course of the 2000 presidential campaign, *Salon* frequently targeted the obvious intellectual limitations of Republican candidate George W. Bush for ridicule, and occasionally criticized his policies. But its Washington correspondent Jake Tapper evinced a growing sympathy for the Bush campaign, culminating in an election-eve prediction that Bush would win—and deserved to win—a sweeping electoral victory.

While *Salon* claimed in 1998 that it was necessary to “fight fire with fire” in relation to the right-wing attempted political coup, by the time of the 2000 post-election crisis the online magazine had concluded it was not necessary to fight at all. *Salon* was indifferent to the democratic principles at stake in the Florida conflict, presenting it as a bizarre and entertaining public spectacle.

Tapper’s dispatches—and a subsequent book—took a “plague on both your houses” approach to the successful effort by the Republicans to hijack the election. Even the intervention of the US Supreme Court, ordering an end to vote-counting in Florida and proclaiming the doctrine that the American people had no constitutional right to vote for president, was treated in a cynical and light-minded fashion, rather than as a turning point in American political history.

This combination of derision and indifference to democratic principles characterizes *Salon*’s attitude to the first months of the Bush administration. Typical was Tapper’s June 20 article in which he belittled the significance of health care as an urgent social need, describing congressional hearings on the proposed patients bill of rights as nothing more than “dueling horror stories.”

Especially revealing of a lack of concern for democratic rights was a June 8 article by Alicia Montgomery on the release of the Civil Rights Commission report on voter disenfranchisement in the Florida presidential election. Montgomery described the report’s release as “another partisan catfight,” criticized the document for a “dearth of hard numbers,” and approvingly quoted a Republican who criticized the report as purely partisan, writing, “She had a point.”

A highly flattering article on *Salon* published June 18 in *USA Today* suggests both the material and moral underpinning of the publication’s increasingly right-wing orientation. The article trumpets the supposed independence of the publication, with the headline, “‘*Salon*’ does what it wants.”

The tone of the article is one of gushing tribute: “A day spent at *Salon*’s offices just off bustling Market Street shows what happens when people with an alternative sensibility gather behind a charismatic leader and use the freewheeling Net to do, well, whatever they want.”

In what sense can *Salon* be said to represent an “alternative sensibility”? It certainly is not an alternative to the mainstream capitalist media. Its commentaries are well within the narrow spectrum of opinion that characterizes American bourgeois politics.

Nor are its personnel greatly distinguished from the rest of the bourgeois media, in either their ideas or their lifestyle. According

to *USA Today*, the professional staff at *Salon* are paid salaries in the high five or low six figures, putting them in the top ten percent income bracket, a curious state of affairs for an “alternative” publication, but one quite typical of modern American journalism, whose representatives are typically ensconced among sated and corrupt layers of the upper middle class.

The only thing that today distinguishes *Salon* from the run-of-the-mill punditry of the establishment media is its willingness to delve into certain areas, particularly those involving sexual mores, where the more staid corporate-controlled press has held back.

In the past month, for instance, *Salon* has devoted extensive coverage to an exposure of the sexual proclivities of conservative gay journalist Andrew Sullivan, giving it more attention than the controversy over the execution of Timothy McVeigh. Joan Walsh wrote that the Sullivan case and the reports of illegal drinking by Bush’s daughter Jenna raised “the toughest and most fascinating questions in journalism today.”

This focus on sex—one of the ten web sites that comprise Salon.com is entirely devoted to the subject—has a dual significance. It represents, of course, an attempt to find a profitable niche. Sex sells.

From a sociological and ideological standpoint, an obsession with sex is typical of a layer of the once-radical middle class who, having given up on any prospect of transforming society in a progressive direction, turn inwards and seek an individualized, “personal” solution to a crisis which is fundamentally social in character. This is a layer that has grown more conservative and cynical the more its stock portfolios have benefited from the speculative boom of recent years.

Whatever the outcome of its current financial travail, Salon.com has already demonstrated that to produce a genuinely independent online political journal requires more than radical posturing and sensationalism. Independence, if it is to have any real significance, must be rooted in a principled opposition, informed by an understanding of the historical lessons of the great events of the past century, to the social structure of America in 2001, and a determination to defend the interests of working and oppressed people internationally.



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