



## THE BLOG

# The Two Howies

By Marty Kaplan

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After a week of being zinged for giving the Washington Post's amplifier to the freshly-laundered Republican operatives attempting to Swift Boat Congressman Jack Murtha, Howie Kurtz invited slimer Marc Morano on his CNN show *Reliable Sources* to defend the attack.

Morano's case was that he was just doing "Journalism 101." His mission was to do what any other reporter does — to perform research, to investigate, to inform the public about controversies in Murtha's past.

But if that's what Journalism 101 really is, then a reporter who mentions the "controversy" about Jews being Christ-killers in the course of a story about Russ Feingold or Michael Chertoff, or a reporter who pulls in the "controversy" about the earth being created 6000 years ago while covering a NASA probe which brought back comet dust ("allegedly"?) 4.5 billion years old, is also a journalist.

Of course, that's what the right wants people to think. For some decades, under market pressures, the goal of journalism has been morphing from telling truths to telling stories. In recent years, it's not just the pressure to make money and entertain that's warped the journalistic enterprise in this direction; it's also political forces. Today, nothing is easier for an ideologue to do than fabricate a he-said/she-said dispute and get it covered.

That's the rationale Howie used in defending his Post piece in an online chat. What he wrote, he said, was "a *straight news story*, meaning I called up the various people involved... and *reported on the effort* to question Murtha's two Purple Hearts from his service in Vietnam....In my view, *the mere fact of this effort* against Murtha was newsworthy, as has been made clear by all the commentary it's sparked, and people can *make up their own minds* whether the effort is fair or outrageous" (emphases added).

That's a perfect definition of Pomo Journo 101. Straight news isn't figuring out which side of a controversy has more merit than another, or which disputant's motives are more worrisome. Straight news is allowing the decibels of the commentary noise machine to set the agenda of what's worth covering; straight news is reporters patting themselves on the back for not giving readers a scorecard to tell truth from truthiness.

On the CNN show, not only did Howie not challenge Morano's definition of journalism. When a guest in a later segment accurately described Morano's employer, Cybercast News Service, as a right-wing faux-journalism front for

Republican talking points, Howie leaped in to say that “others” would claim that Cybercast News Service is legitimate. Yup — and “others” would claim that Fox is fair and balanced, or that Terri Schaivo could see. Howie is not wrong to think that his producers and Beltway journo peers would *want* him to jump in and say that; the problem is that this is how degraded and pathetic the idea of “providing context” has become.

The irony is that Howie clearly knows better. In that same online chat, commenting on how deadlines and competitive pressures also drive journalism, he said this: “The best journalism, of course, takes more time to dig deeper into a story and try to separate the wheat from the chaff.” Of course!

Jack Murtha: wheat. Marc Morano: chaff.

Now how hard was that?

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