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# The Media Are the Message



By Marty Kaplan

They lost control of the message.

That's now become the universal diagnosis of Team Obama's mistake during the stimulus bill debate. From the commentariat to the White House chief of staff, the lesson to be learned from the last two weeks, we are told, is that the administration let the Republicans frame the debate.

Now I can understand why Rahm Emanuel would say that to a bunch of reporters. A *mea culpa* about last week is the price for moving the topic this week to the foreclosure crisis. If the White House hadn't declared that the precipitous end of the honeymoon was its own damn fault, the press corps would have kept gnawing at that bone, and would have turned the stimulus debate into Exhibit A of the obituary of Change We Can Believe In. But because Emanuel copped to losing control of the message, the media finally permitted the Democrats to declare that the passage of the bill — the nation's single largest investment in infrastructure, education and scientific research since the Depression — was in fact a victory, and to reboot for round two.

What's so discomfiting about this transaction is what it says about the role that the media have carved out for themselves in American public life.

If the job of the press were to help the public understand what's really important, and to distinguish propaganda from facts, then Republican attempts to sink the bill by defining it as liberal pork would have gone nowhere. The endangered mouse that Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) was allegedly earmarking billions to protect; the Las Vegas supertrain that Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) was claimed to have snuck in; the rationing of health care that former New York Lieut. Gov. Betsy McCaughey accused Tom Daschle of hiding in the bill: None of these and other colorful lies would have gained any traction if truth value were a prerequisite for airtime. Instead, unfortunately, the more outrageous the allegation, the more irresistible it was to the media.

When reporting is reconceived as stenography, there's no place in news for news judgment. The Republicans know this. If we trash it, they will come — that's the GOP's formula for gaming the Beltway press corps. With a handful of honorable exceptions, television journalists are particularly helpless in the face of phony charges. Instead of sorting things through, they just serve them up, to be repeated in the right-wing echo chamber on cable, talk radio and the internet. The closest the mainstream media come to helping citizens distinguish what's believable from what's baloney is the weasely formulation, "Some say... but others say..." If citizens want to separate what's true from what's spin, well, you're on your own, pal.

I'm not saying that the Democrats were blameless during this debate. Calling it a stimulus bill instead of a jobs bill was lame-brained, and a measure of how easy it is to be co-opted by technocratic insider culture. Maybe only one percent of the House bill's provisions, as the president said, were controversial, but that's one percent too many; if ever there were cause for the White House to strong-arm the drafters of the package, this was that moment. Two hundred million dollars to fund contraception through Medicaid might be good public policy on its own, but putting it in this bill was just asking for trouble.

And don't get me started on the Brigadoon of bipartisanship. House Republicans united in lockstep and in martyrdom: Senate Republicans rejected out of hand the core idea of creating jobs through public spending and instead united on a trickle-down tax cut of \$2.5 trillion over 10 years, as though George W. Bush had won a third term. Maybe someone, somewhere, gave Obama credit for trying to work with these obstructionist sore losers, but surely more people suspected that only chumps search for common ground with scorpions.

Still, whatever Obama did wrong, it was no reason for the media to go gaga for grandstanding Republican demagoguery. Sure, I'm glad that the president fought back with a prime time news conference, and began using his bully pulpit, and got out of town, and finally produced some partisan sound bites. But something's dangerously wrong with the Fourth Estate when it's obsessed by "narratives" and indifferent to facts.

Political coverage, especially on cable, has become a branch of theater criticism. What counts isn't the merits of the case; what's appraised is the mastery of stagecraft. This is what politics has come to mean: not the apportionment of power, but the snow job of show biz.

Obama didn't lose control of the message. The mainstream media lost control of its mission. Of course that didn't happen just yesterday — ever since news became a profit center within entertainment conglomerates the real purpose of television news has been to get people to watch it. To aggregate audiences and to sell their eyeballs to advertisers, it's not necessary, and it's awfully expensive, to take pains to figure out what's accurate. It's much better television, and it costs nothing at all, to hand a bullhorn to a propagandist. Nothing, that is, to the networks — just not nothing to democracy.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*