

**THE BLOG**

Journalism's Broken Windows

By Marty Kaplan

05/02/2006 12:13 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

The backwash from the White House Correspondents Association has quickly gone meta. We've moved from the baseline question of whether Colbert was better than Bush to the propriety of irony speaking truth to power... the telling absence of MSM coverage of Colbert... the blogosphere's anger at journos behaving like courtiers at Versailles... the media mandarins' disdain for bloggy rudeness... and the brushoff of the whole kerfuffle as no more than a sideshow, a runaway bride.

Part of the Washington media's reaction to the depiction of its prom is how amazingly slow it has been to realize that the nature of journalism itself is contested ground. But of course it's painful to acknowledge that objectivity is an endangered species in the postmodern zoo; that the public thinks the wall between news and opinion is a joke; that in a profit-driven infotainment era, the public interest has been displaced by what the public is interested in; that fairness and balance have become degraded he-said/she-said exercises in ass-covering; that most politicians deeply detest most reporters.

I guess if you put enough journalists in the same ballroom, it's easier to be in denial about the impact of Fox and The Washington Times and faux think-tanks and bloviators on your profession. If the President comes to your party, surely it's a validation of your credibility, of your relevance to the nation's democratic well-being. On such a night, it's effortless to think that Blogistan is far away, full of rabble, and no threat to your authority or longevity. I imagine Marie Antoinette felt the same way.

The media establishment doesn't seem able to understand that the passion that motivates many people to blog about the MSM, and many more to comment on those posts, is born of an old-fashioned appreciation of the power and role of journalism. When bloggers jump on what they believe to be stenography rather than reporting, when they denounce partisan narratives posing as uncontested wisdom, when they push back against blind-source footsie: they're doing it because they're in awe of what good journalism is capable of doing.

It reminds me of James Q. Wilson's "broken windows" concept of crime prevention. A neighborhood that tolerates broken windows is a community that tacitly says to criminals, Come on in. A place that doesn't have the self-respect to notice negligence is a place where bigtime lawbreakers can thrive.

On the Web, anyone can shine a spotlight on what they believe to be journalistic malfeasance. Sometimes — as when the press rolled over on WMD — it's a capital crime that the media are being called on. And sometimes, as with the meta-debate about the White House Correspondents Dinner, it's broken windows. The online public doesn't want to tear down the press. It — we — want the press to respect itself enough to survive.

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