



THE BLOG 08/30/2012 08:27 am ET | Updated Oct 30, 2012

Romney/Ryan and the Lullaby of Lying



By Marty Kaplan

It shouldn't have taken Todd Akin's crackpot contraception comment to alert us that Paul Ryan thinks rape is just another "method of conception."

If the news media hadn't grown blasé about the Republican war on women, plenty of pre-Akin Americans would have already known that GOP majorities in Congress and state legislatures have repeatedly voted to narrow the definition of "legitimate rape" to "forcible rape," forcing statutory rape victims to carry their pregnancies to term. If journalists hadn't succumbed to outrage fatigue about right wing extremism, it would have been common knowledge that Republican lawmakers are pushing constitutional amendments to grant "personhood" to fertilized eggs, which would criminalize birth control pills, IUDs and *in vitro* fertility procedures. If cynicism weren't the default mode of political reporting, we'd now be seeing Mitt Romney's feet held to the fire of his party's platform, which bans abortion with no exception for rape, incest or threat to the life of the mother — and RNC chairman Reince Preibus' attempt to dissociate the candidate from his platform would be worth more than a chuckle and a yawn from the press corps.

"The Big Lie" is a propaganda technique that kids hear about in school. If you learn what Nazis and Communists did, if you read Orwell's "1984," you're supposed to be inoculated against pervasive, outrageous falsehoods. That's why Jefferson and Franklin counted on public education and public libraries. It's also why the First Amendment protects the fourth estate; it shields muckrakers, investigative journalists, critics and gadflies from censorship.

But today the biggest threat to democracy isn't government intimidation of the press. It's boredom — a consequence of the domination of political communication by paid media, the subordination of news to entertainment, the imperative to monetize audience attention, the fear that information and amusement are locked in a zero sum game.

Mitt Romney and deep pockets like the Koch brothers and Sheldon Adelson have flooded the airwaves with ads claiming that Barack Obama has eliminated the work requirement for welfare and stolen benefits from Medicare recipients to fund a government takeover of health care. These are lies, and there are lots

more like them out there. In the democracy of our dreams, the press relentlessly exposes their falsehood, and media-literate citizens, proficient at critical thinking, are immune from manipulation. But the press is not relentless, and people seem to have given up on demanding a junkyard-dog standard from democracy's guardians.

For the news industry, it's an easy call. How often can a station or a paper run the same story? After crying foul a few times about the Romney campaign's effort to convince white working class voters that Obama is handing out food stamps to lazy blacks, there's no news left in the narrative. Networks fear that audiences will get bored, so they move on. And yes, there may be some truth to their understanding of their customers. We're hooked on novelty, suckers for speed, addled by ADD. But billionaires don't get bored. They keep paying to pound those ads into our heads, whether we like it or not. Repetition is the demagogue's best friend.

No member of Congress is farther to the right than Paul Ryan. He's an acolyte of the ideologue Ayn Rand, but the media, having done its obligatory story on her noxious philosophy, is perfectly content to use Ryan's recent brushoff of her influence on him as an excuse to drop the story. The vaunted Ryan budget is actually a roadmap for eliminating the safety net that has defined the American social contract since the 1930s, but explaining this takes time, which risks audience share, and in the face of a barrage of ads portraying him as the savior of seniors, it takes the kind of persistence that news executives fear hurts ratings. He is a hypocrite of the first order, a deficit hawk who voted to increase the deficit by hundreds of billions of dollars and whose tax plan is demonstrably fraudulent, but hey, how 'bout the six-pack on that dreamboat?

If the media were doing its job in this election, the story it would be telling over and over is that Mitt Romney's qualification for the presidency consists of a career at Bain Capital about which we know essentially nothing; that his economic plan is the most massive transfer of wealth to the rich from the rest in the history of the country; that he arrogantly, petulantly and suspiciously refuses to play by the same financial disclosure rules that have applied to presidential candidates since his father ran; that his foreign policy team is a reunion of the neocon club that gave us Iraq; that the health care reform he championed in Massachusetts is virtually identical to the Affordable Care Act he promises to repeal; that he has changed sides on climate change, gun control, a woman's right to choose and so many other issues that the only consistent theme in his record is the urgency of pandering to the right, a spinelessness he is unlikely to abjure as president; and that Republican efforts to suppress voter turnout may well send him to the White House.

But that's old news. Been there, done that. I'll leave it to others to make the case that the press is giving Obama a free ride. If that's true, then there's been a double dereliction of duty. News producers are afraid that indefatigable fact checking of either party will bore the pants off people. But I don't smell any fear of ennui emanating from station owners making billions off broadcasting the Big Lie.

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