

**THE BLOG****My Media Fast**

By Marty Kaplan

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I spent 24 hours this past weekend off the grid — no television, no print, no online, no news. It was a Jewish thing, not a Walden thing. When it ended, with a media break-fast, I couldn't help my thoughts from going meta. It wasn't the particular political news I consumed that I found myself tasting, but rather the nature of political news itself. I think it's making me sick.

There was, for example, the *Washington Post* story by Chris Cillizza and Shailagh Murray exclusively reporting a Celinda Lake survey saying that Clinton and Obama were anvils dragging down the prospects of “the 31 Democratic-held House districts regarded as most imperiled in 2008.” I first heard about the Lake poll when it was cited by Joe Johns on Wolf Blitzer's Sunday roundtable, and by someone — I think it was Cokie Roberts — on George Stephanopoulos' show.

But neither Cillizza/Murray, nor their echo chambermaids, called Lake's survey what it was: a push poll. I found that out from [Atrios](#), and from [Steve Benen on TalkingPointsMemo](#). Here's the question Lake asked:

*“Some people say [your Democratic incumbent] is a strong supporter of Hillary Clinton and will support **her liberal agenda of big government and higher taxes** if she becomes president,” the poll stated, before asking respondents whether they would still vote for their incumbent or choose a Republican candidate” [bold added].*

The other version subbed Obama for Clinton. It wasn't enough for Lake to name Clinton or Obama; she had to tar them with Republican talking points about *any* Democrat. She might as well have also called them soft on terrorists and cut-and-runners. Is it any wonder that House incumbent numbers fell? Nor did Cillizza/Murray note — though Atrios did — that Lake is working for Biden, as [Cillizza himself reported](#). “Lake,” he wrote on the *Post's* blog, is “a well-known pollster among the chattering class.”

Another example: The MoveOn.org *New York Times* ad, I shouldn't have been surprised to see, was still a whipping boy, and an easy way to dodge discussion of the debacle in Iraq. It wasn't from television or print, though, that I learned what I found on Media Matters: that Rush Limbaugh has repeatedly called Chuck Hagel — a Vietnam veteran with two purple hearts — “Senator Betrayus,” for his Foreign Relations Committee vote for a nonbinding resolution on against the Iraq escalation. Georgia10 gave the Media Matters story some legs by posting it on Kos. She put it under the headline “The Hypocrisy! It Burns!” and framed it this way: “Just episode 51,003,926 of ‘It's OK If You're A

Republican’... But, folks, this time around, it was an *Ad*. In a *Newspaper*. By a (gasp!), *liberal* organization. That really makes all the difference in the world.”

One more: On the Stephanopoulos panel, reacting to a Romney ad where the candidate says the Republican Party has lost its way, conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks said that this Mitt tack was a good move, comparing it favorably to George W. Bush’s 1999 strategy of redefining Republicanism as BigTent-ism. That’s right: the Party that gutted the civil rights division of the Justice Department, that seared our brain with Katrina indifference, that turned comprehensive immigration reform into an Hispanic demonization contest, that sold the Party’s soul, such as it was, to theocratic bullies — this was the consequence of Bush’s con job, and this is just the horse that Brooks wants Romney to ride. You couldn’t want a clearer illustration of the unaccountability of punditry, the triumph of theater over principle, the unctuousness of Brooks’ moral core. I was waiting for E.J. Dionne to nail him, but since he didn’t, I can.

Now I suppose the lesson I could draw from these examples is The Power of the Internets. TPM, Kos, Eschaton, HuffPo, Media Matters: these new media pipes provide a wondrous instrument to counteract the mighty right-wing Wurlitzer. Instead — maybe because these stories came at the end of a sundown-to-sundown meditation on mortality — what I take from my re-entry news nausea is how toxically absurd the whole media-political enterprise has become. Yes, I fully appreciate the corrective power of the netroots, and the imperative to challenge propaganda, and the alarming susceptibility of the beleaguered American electorate to fear and demagoguery. But I’m afraid that, while citizen-activists have embraced the understanding that media = politics, the Washington political class has made the mistake of believing that politics = media.

Why else would Congressional Democrats vote against their own constituents? Polls tell them that their stand on the war suffers from Stockholm Syndrome; despite overwhelming majorities against Bush policy, they emerged from Republican captivity making excuses for their captors. Polls also tell them that the more they kiss Republican butt, the deeper the contempt Americans hold them in, yet they persist in bipartisan fantasies. Why do they do that, if not because they fear the Limbaughs and O’Reillys more than they believe their constituents? Why do they vote against their own values and their own voters, if not because they have abandoned the vital distinction between political news and politics, between pseudo-events and actual ones, between images and ideas, between media and reality? I know it’s too much to ask our punditocracy, and the power brokers posing as journalists, to recognize the essential triviality of their shadow-play on the wall of the cave. But is it too much to ask our elected representatives to distinguish between American democracy and the media circus it has become?

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