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The Scary Staleness of Truth Telling



By Marty Kaplan

Why, an audience member asked NPR's Linda Wertheimer at a San Diego symposium this past weekend, wasn't public radio correcting all the lies being told in the campaign?

We do correct a lot of them, she replied. We report that candidate so-and-so made a certain claim today, and then we compare the claim with the facts, and we show that it's not true. The problem, she went on to say, is that our coverage doesn't stop candidate so-and-so from repeating the same falsehood over and over again, but we can't keep repeating the same story day after day, because it's not news any more.

She's right. There are always newer whoppers to fact-check, and news needs to be new. But in a campaign that will see \$3 billion spent on political advertising — a record high, exceeding even the 2008 presidential-year campaign — the reasonable premium that journalism puts on novelty is what plenty of candidates are banking on. If you say anything, no matter how mendacious, enough times, people will come to believe it's true.

In our media ecosystem, no truth-squadding can ever get as much airtime as paid ads. Worse, the Supreme Court this year opened the floodgates for corporations to spend unlimited amounts on ads. And because Republicans filibustered a law that would have required disclosing who's paying for those ads, Karl Rove, Dick Armey and their ilk are laundering those donations via front groups with anodyne names like Americans for an American America.

"A democracy can die from too many lies," Bill Moyers said at the same event only a few minutes before Linda Wertheimer spoke. It's sobering. But you'd never know the stakes were that high from the kind of campaign coverage we Americans have settled for getting.

Case in point: this weekend's back-and-forth between Representatives Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) and Mike Pence (R-IN) about the House Republicans' Pledge to America, moderated by David Gregory on NBC's *Meet the Press*. Why does anyone besides someone as masochistic as me watch this stuff? An algorithm could generate gotcha kabuki like this, and you'd never know the difference.

Gregory asks Pence how Republicans can reduce the deficit if they extend the Bush tax cuts, and Pence responds with boilerplate about Democrats raising taxes on small businesses. Gregory asks Van Hollen how Democrats can rule out middle class tax hikes if they want to get serious about the deficit, and Van Hollen responds by ignoring his question. Gregory asks Pence how Republicans will deal with entitlement spending — will they raise the retirement age? — and Pence offers the usual pieties about keeping “our promises to seniors and near-seniors.” Gregory asks Van Hollen to name the Democrats’ three to five top campaign points, and Van Hollen’s answer wanders from small business and Chinese currency manipulation to clean energy jobs and earmarks.

Gregory knows neither guest is going to stray from his talking points (though Van Hollen sure could use a better shortlist), but he isn’t going to stray from his own talking points, either. “Watch the tricks these guys play to avoid my straight-talk traps!” That’s the subtext we’re meant to admire, as if we’ve never witnessed this depressing ritual before.

The goal of these Sunday shows — what their makers want most — is to generate news, and it’s not news that Republicans and Democrats both have ridiculous positions on the deficit. So it was no surprise, except for the nakedness of the admission, when Gregory began the segment by trying to suck Van Hollen into the contretemps between Senate and House Democrats about when to schedule the tax cut vote. “What about the timing?” Gregory asked Van Hollen. “Answer this question about the timing. Maybe — because this is where the news is — should the House take this up before the midterm vote?”

This is where the news is. It’s not news that Republican wailing about the impending tax burden on small businesses is a bogus claim meant to mask their advocacy of tax cuts for billionaires. It’s not news that Republican dogma about the jobs-generating effect of tax cuts for the richest Americans is economic nonsense. But it is news when strategy, tactics, timing — the Beltway insider’s game — is on the table.

I’m not dewy-eyed enough to believe that a network Sunday show can get Monday headlines by pinning Pinocchio badges on its guests. Nor, though NPR’s coverage may well do more fact-checking than commercial networks, do I have a solution to the quandary Linda Wertheimer described: How many times can you (politely) say that Candidate X lied today, when Candidate X lies every day, and so do Candidates A through Z?

Yet I also can’t get Bill Moyers’ point about democracies dying of lying out of my head. He also said that, on his PBS programs, one of the things that he and his wife and producing partner, Judith Davidson Moyers, have struggled with is the amount of toxicity — the deceitful, dangerous part of public discourse — to put on the air. On the one hand, it’s important to know the truth about what’s going on. On the other, it’s painful to know the truth, but to be unable to act on it. How can you deal with cancer, he asked, speaking of the vulnerability of democracy to partisan propaganda, unless you know the diagnosis?

As long as news needs to be new — which is another way of saying, as long as news (even public broadcasting news) depends on ratings — it’s hard to imagine that a daily diet of “here’s who damaged democracy today” will grab an audience, especially if it’s the same demagogues as yesterday. Unless, of course, you’re funny when you say it. But the sanity of Jon Stewart deserves a column of its own.