

**THE BLOG****As Good (And Bad) As It Gets**

By Marty Kaplan

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Unless you believe in some prior golden age of media and politics, what we are watching unfold during this last week before the election is as good as it gets for American democracy.

The journalism reaching us right now has never been more voluminous, costly, multi-platformed, judicious, moronic, canny, repulsive, slanted, illuminating, depressing: name the category, pick the superlative, and it's arguable that it applies to 2006. The same thing is true for the candidates, the campaigns, the ads, the apparatchiks and the voters themselves. This, right now, is state of the art. This is what the dreams of Jefferson and Madison have come to. This is how the Founders' hopes for an educated citizenry, a representative democracy, an open society — this is how it's all turned out.

Can we do better than this, or worse? It's not an abstract question. The precise measure of our ability to live up to the American promise is not some woulda/coulda/shoulda; it's what we're experiencing at this very moment, in real time.

It's pretty near impossible, of course, to separate the grade you'd give to democracy from the outcome for the election that you're rooting for. Personally, I'm exhilarated by the grass-roots activism of the blogosphere, its power to democratize the opinion industry, to fact-check and smear-check news and politics, to open new channels of message creativity and to drill wildcat wells of independent fundraising. I'm also tremendously impressed by the idealism, patriotism and energy of the candidates fielded by the Democrats. On the other hand, I can imagine that there are Republicans who are just as thrilled as can be by the values embodied by George Allen, Bob Corker, Rush Limbaugh and the rest of the stars on their team. If my side triumphs, I'll likely say the system works. If not, I'll want to take a really long shower (unless, that is, there's evidence of chicanery demanding us to take it to the streets).

For people concerned about the robustness of democracy, the danger this last week is thinking that everything's now on autopilot, imagining that all the press and the public can do is to ride the tiger. That's not true. Traditionally, this is the week when the most outrageous, slimy, lying ads are run, especially on radio, along with the appearance of the most disgusting pieces of direct mail, the most reprehensible push-polling, the most aggressive, illegal attempts to suppress turnout and deny the franchise. This is the week when the head game — the battle over optimism and expectations — is as important as the ground game. This is the height of the wildfire season for character assassination, for news arson, for October and November surprises.

In an earlier era, all Americans could do during times like this was to watch the finale of the show, and hope that people today are better than the puppets depicted in “Coriolanus” and the proles manipulated by demagogues in “1984,” and pray that voter turnout reflects the will of a true majority rather than the power of a rabid faction. But today, I’m naive enough to hope that the internet holds the promise to be a corrective to the passive spectacle of the endgame. There is, at long last, a feedback loop between the online world and the media-incumbency complex. It may well turn out to be not nearly enough to rage against the machine decisively, to countervail against top-down power with bottom-up power. But if the results on Election Day look anything close to the results of the hundreds of polls this past year declaring Americans’ opinion of the unprecedently crappy track the country is on, then save some champagne to celebrate the positive power of the communication revolution — and save some fight for preserving the neutrality of the internet.

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