

**THE BLOG****Journalism: R.I.P.**

By Marty Kaplan

11/17/2005 12:53 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Mainstream journalism has cancer. The diagnosis – stage three, terminal – was made this week, by anyone with eyes to see.

Before now, the symptoms were alarming, but there was still hope. Fox’s “liberal media” lie; the reduction of all debates to polarized left/right shouting matches; the triumph of infotainment and missing-white-women-as-news over information we actually need to know; the substitution of he-said/she-said for shoe-leather and fact-finding; the social coziness of reporters and sources; the bottom-line obsession; the consolidation of power in fewer and fewer owners’ hands’ the politicization of public broadcasting – these, and more, were tumors, but their fatal metastasizing was not inevitable.

But the coverage of the battle between the White House and the Democrats over the use of prewar intelligence, and the reporting on *l’affaire* Woodward, is the end of the road for the mandarin gatekeepers.

If the Judy Miller saga left anyone wondering what high-church journalism’s standards are about sourcing, confidentiality, and citizen responsibility, the Bob Woodward tale now makes it clear: **They make the rules up as they go along.** Guidelines and handbooks are for rookies and chumps. If you’re a diva, if you’re working on a book, if you don’t feel like being served with a subpoena, if you think you know better, if don’t want to piss off a source – well, then, you do what you damn well please. It turns out that investigative reporters have the same right to clam up or spin when journalists ask them questions as do White House press secretaries, oil barons or starlets.

We also know now that the MSM is largely useless for adjudicating between conflicting claims and establishing what the facts are. The Bush/Cheney onslaught against its critics is being covered lavishly – *but only as theater*. Look at the Democrats cry “manipulation”! Look at the Republicans cry “treason”! A war is at stake. The nation’s reputation around the world is at stake. Lives hang in the balance. And all the media can do is cover tactics, politics, the melodrama of thrust-and-parry. The rare reporters who have attempted to create a useful scorecard are battling their weasel-minded editors’ insistence on a bizarre postmodern notion of balance. You know the CYA drill: if you say a good word about Darwin, ya gotta juxtapose it with some intelligent design whackball’s counterquote; if you say Cheney lied about the Saddam connection to 9/11, you’ve still got to dredge up every nutjob’s assertion that the Atta meeting in Prague can’t be disproved.

The worst – and this is what pushed me over the edge – is the disgraceful mischaracterization of the impact of the Woodward revelation on Fitzgerald’s case against Libby. With the exception of Keith Olberman, everyone is parroting Libby’s lawyer’s lie that this disproves Fitzgerald’s assertion that Libby was the first person in the Administration to leak Valerie Plame’s name. Fitzgerald, of course, didn’t say that. He said that Libby was “the first government official known to have told a reporter.” This is not a small distinction; it is not quibbling about words. If Woodward hadn’t decided that the World-According-to-Bob rules meant that he could keep his mouth shut while the Grand Jury was still empaneled, then Fitzgerald would have been able to add the leak to Woodward to his timetable. (And if Libby hadn’t thrown sand in Fitzgerald’s eyes, the investigation could have gone deeper.)

And yet now the Washington Post, ABC News, CNN, NBC and the AP have spread the lie, and soon every lazy stenographer on the planet posing as a journalist will gladly cut and paste this Republican propoganda into their narrative of the most troubling chapter in modern American history. What does it say about the news profession when most of the voices determined to ensure accuracy are onliners working without benefit of staffs below them, editors above them, or brand-name seals of approval from the priesthood?

I know, I know: there are fine men and women toiling away at newspapers, magazines, and television and radio networks. It’s true. And there are journalism schools valiantly fighting to instill respect for fairness and accuracy in the generation coming up. But these good people are healthy cells in a dying body. For all the unreliability and anarchy of the Web, if it weren’t for the energy of the internet, the funeral for the Fourth Estate would be happening this week.

UPDATE: Add James Kuhnenn and Jonathan S. Landay of Knight Ridder Newspapers (the chain that’s up for sale!) to the honor roll that includes Keith Olberman. Any other nominees?

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director